Commentary

February 2006

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James Q. Wilson

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The Beatles Now

Terry Teachout

Books in Review

Efraim Karsh • *Richard Pipes* • *Dan Seligman*
Wilfred M. McClay • *David Pryce-Jones*

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Commentary

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Commentary
February 2006

Letters from Readers

Genocide?

To the Editor:

Guenter Lewy's article is an accurate reflection of the Turkish government's nine-decade-long campaign to deny the Armenian genocide ["The First Genocide of the 20th Century?," December 2005]. Like the Turkish government (which prosecutes its citizens for even referring to an Armenian genocide), Mr. Lewy claims that: (1) what happened to the Armenians at the hands of the Turks in 1915-16 somehow does not qualify as genocide; (2) all the documents that scholars have used for decades as evidence of the genocide are forgeries or otherwise unreliable; (3) the times were hard for the Ottoman Empire, too, and many Turks, especially soldiers, died along with Armenian civilians from famine, disease, and wartime chaos; (4) the Armenians are to blame for their fate because guerrilla groups and revolutionaries teamed up with the Russians who were fighting against the Ottomans in World War I.

In fact, documentation of the genocide is abundant and incontrovertible. For starters, there are some 4,000 U.S. State Department documents in the National Archives, written by neutral American diplomats and confirming what Ambassador Henry Morgenthau called "a campaign of race extermination"; the edition of the British Parliamentary Blue Book titled "The Treatment of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-16," compiled by Viscount Bryce and Arnold Toynbee; the foreign-office records of Austria and Germany (Turkey's wartime allies) now available as books; and the Ottoman parliamentary gazette, which records the confessions of government and military officials at the Constantinople war-crimes tribunal held after the war. (Mr. Lewy claims the gazette records are invalid, but their authenticity has been validated by meticulous scholarship.)

Add to this the thousands of pages of eyewitness accounts from relief workers, missionaries, and survivors, and one can see why the Armenian genocide is established history. The documentation shows that the ruling Turkish government, through high-level bureaucratic planning, emergency executive legislation, the mobilization of killing squads that included some 30,000 convicts released from prison, and an ingenious use of railroad and telegraph technology, implemented the empire-wide deportation and massacre of its persecuted Christian minority.

To claim that Armenians were revolutionaries threatening the security of the Ottoman Empire is to confuse resistance to slaughter with revolt. Mr. Lewy's assertion that because there were thousands of Russian Armenians in the Russian army all the Ottoman Armenians were disloyal is a non-sequitur. The former were, after all, Russian citizens, many of whom fought on the European front. It is true that thousands of Ottoman Armenians fled to fight for the Russians, but these defections had nothing to do with the more than 2 million loyal Armenians spread throughout Turkey.

Mr. Lewy's manipulation of history is so blatant that in his attempt to provide context for why Armenians became dangerous "revolutionaries" in the 1890's, he neglects to mention the major event of the era: Sultan Abdul Hamid II's massacre of 200,000 Armenians in 1894-96. This was in response to Armenian protests for civil-rights reforms that they hoped would ameliorate their "infidel Christian" status. So unprecedented in modern history were these massacres of defenseless citizens that human-rights movements sprang up all

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over Europe and the United States in response, and Abdul Hamid was dubbed the "bloody Sultan."

Mr. Lewy's denialist strategy is also clear in his effort to separate Raphael Lemkin, the man who coined the term "genocide," from the Armenian genocide by suggesting that Lemkin meant the term only for the Holocaust. But Lemkin named the Armenian case in first developing the concept of genocide, and he consecrated the term "Armenian genocide" in a nationally televised interview in 1949.

Mr. Lewy's claim that there is no proof of the Ottoman government's intent to destroy the Armenian people is an absurdity. The entire corpus of documentary evidence corroborates many times over how systematic and organized the extermination was. Every book on comparative genocide in the English language has a substantial section on the Armenian case, and the International Association of Genocide Scholars is unanimous in its assessment that it was one of the major genocides of the modern era.

The record yields one of the most grotesque compendiums of government-planned murder and plunder in history. For a historian to assert that "the documentary evidence suggests that the Ottoman government wanted to arrange an orderly process of deportation" that was "humane" and "compassionate" is as outrageous as the claim of David Irving and other Holocaust deniers that there were no gas chambers in the Nazi camps.

PETER BALAKIAN
Colgate University
Hamilton, New York

TO THE EDITOR:

Guenter Lewy's article is too clever by far. First, he denies that the Armenians were victims of genocide because evidence of premeditation on the part of the Turks is not apparent to him. He seems to find it problematic for the claim of genocide that Talaat Pasha did not produce posters announcing his intention to wipe out a group "in whole or in part" (as the UN Genocide Convention puts it). Neither, one might note, did Hitler.

But one does not have to string together a list of pronouncements over a period of years to show premeditation; it is sufficient to demonstrate that the perpetrators devised and carried out a plan for extermination.

The genocide of the Armenians was carried out chiefly by a covert "special organization" established by the Ottoman government and later taken over by the dictatorial Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), known popularly as the Young Turks. Brigands, as well as thugs and murderers taken from prisons, were organized into battalions to carry out the killings, along with gendarmes, tribesmen, villagers, and parts of the army. Officials who refused to cooperate with agents of the CUP (who demanded not only the expulsion of the Armenians but also their slaughter) were dismissed from their posts or put to death.

Sophisticated foreign officials, neutral observers as well as friends of the Turks, came to the conclusion that the purpose of the deportation of the Armenians was extermination. The German vice-consul in Erzerum reported in 1916 that "[t]he fear I spoke of . . . that the evacuation of the Armenians would be tantamount to their annihilation [and] that this was the purpose behind it, has unfortunately turned out to be true." In another revealing dispatch in 1916, the third wartime German ambassador at the Ottoman court wrote to his government: "The [CUP] demands the annihilation of the last remnants of the Armenians, and the government must bow to its demands."

The U.S. consul in Harput, Leslie Davis, wrote to the State Department that "[a]nother method was found to destroy the Armenian race. . . . A massacre would be humane in comparison." A second report from Davis was even more pointed: "That the order is nominally to exile the Armenians from these [provinces] may mislead the outside world for a time, but the measure is nothing but a massacre of the most atrocious nature. . . . There is no doubt that this massacre was done by order of the government; there can be no pretense that the measure is anything but a general massacre."

Mr. Lewy has argued elsewhere that though Talaat and his cohort should have known that expulsion under wartime conditions would result in an overwhelming number of deaths, they were too ignorant to understand this. If Mr. Lewy were to go to Turkey today, he, like the novelist Orhan Pamuk, could be prosecuted under the criminal code for "insulting Turkish officials." In fact, the Young Turk officials were highly intelligent and hardly ignorant, which made them all the more culpable for their crimes, and more adept at trying to cover them up.

DENNIS R. PAPAZIAN
Armenian Research Center
University of Michigan
Dearborn, Michigan

TO THE EDITOR:

Guenter Lewy writes that the "historical question at issue" in determining whether the Armenians were victims of genocide at the hands of the Turks "is premeditation—that is, whether the Turkish regime intentionally organized [their] annihilation." He argues that "no authentic documentary evidence exists to prove the culpability of the central government."

This is not correct. During the period in question, 1915-16, the Ottoman Empire was controlled by the Young Turk party, whose leadership triumvirate consisted of Enver Pasha, Talaat Pasha, and Djemal Pasha. Here are their own words.

Enver (1916): "The Ottoman Empire should be cleaned up of the Armenians and the Lebanese. We have destroyed the former by the sword, we shall destroy the latter through starvation."

Talaat (1915): "Turkey is taking advantage of the war in order thoroughly to liquidate its internal foes, i.e., the indigenous Christians, without being thereby disturbed by foreign intervention."

Djemal, upon viewing the deportations: "I am ashamed of my nation."

In 1926, Mustafa Kemal (or Atatürk), head of the modern Turkish Republic, said: "These leftovers from the former Young Turk Party, who should have been made to account for the

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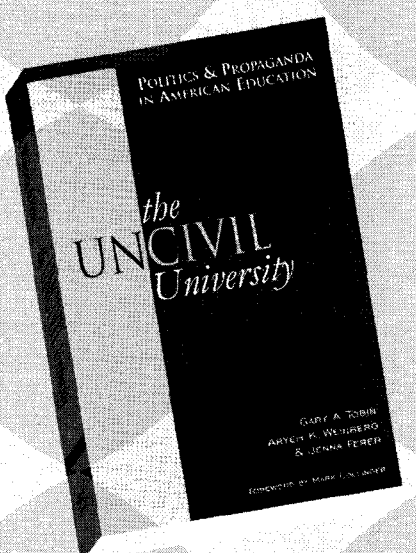
In his new book, scholar Gary A. Tobin documents the alarming presence of anti-Semitism in the form of anti-Israelism on campus. *The UnCivil University* exposes the unspoken world of double standards, bureaucratic paralysis, and abdication of leadership that not only allows but often supports anti-Jewish extremists on campus.



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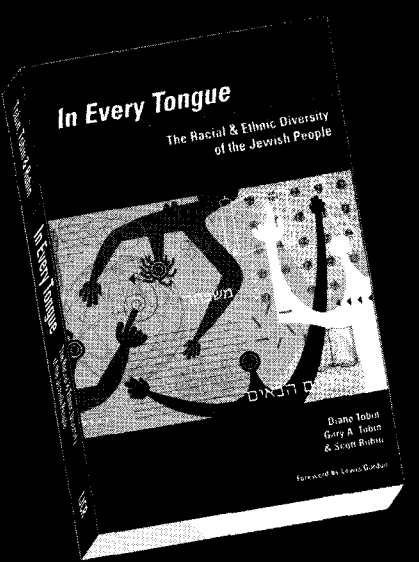

In Every Tongue
The Racial & Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People

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millions of our Christian subjects who were ruthlessly driven en masse from their homes and massacred, have been restive under the Republican rule."

In 1919, Henry Morgenthau, the U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, recalled: "When the Turkish authorities gave the orders for these deportations, they were merely giving the death warrant to a whole race; they understood this well, and, in their conversations with me, they made no particular attempt to conceal the fact."

CHARLES GARO ASHJIAN
Newark, New Jersey

TO THE EDITOR:

Guenter Lewy's article explores why the 1915-16 massacre of 650,000 to 800,000 Armenians might not be considered genocide. There are two main problems with his thesis. First, he overlooks the fact that Armenians were massacred repeatedly in the Muslim Middle East throughout the late-19th and early-20th centuries. The ideology that drove this violence was rooted in the established relationship of the Muslim community toward non-Muslims. As Bat Ye'or, Andrew Bostom, and others have documented, these practices were sanctioned by fourteen centuries of Qur'anic practice.

As Christian "dhimmis" in the Ottoman Empire, the Armenians enjoyed "protection" while being subject to discriminatory taxes, unequal treatment under Islamic law, restrictions in religious expression, and submission to ritual humiliation. Any breach of this contract on the part of non-Muslims could lead to death by the sword.

Second, Mr. Lewy is oddly fixated on the question of whether the genocide of 1915-16 was explicitly "planned." But the fact that Armenians were seen as allied with the Turks' political enemies does not make the butchery of men, women, and children any more explainable. By Mr. Lewy's standard, one could say that the Holocaust was not planned, either, but simply grew out of meetings between Hitler and other leaders as the war developed. After all, many Nazis viewed the Jews as "political enemies" of Germany.

BETTINA FEHR
Dallas, Texas

TO THE EDITOR:

Guenter Lewy writes that the best way to judge the Armenian tragedy is to conclude that the Ottoman government's "primary intent" was "undoubtedly" not to commit genocide but to remove the Armenians from strategic locations, thereby denying support to Armenian guerrilla bands who had allied themselves with the Russians to wage war against the Turks. Succinctly put, it was a matter of self-defense. But it is very strange that the government thought the best way to solve its guerrilla problem was to murder the men and deport the women and children, raping and abusing them on the way.

What are Mr. Lewy's reasons for his conclusion? For one, some Armenian communities were spared deportation. But this does not show that there was no plan for genocide, only that the Turkish government was (as Mr. Lewy describes it at one point) "incompetent and inefficient," and could not carry out its own plan. Mr. Lewy also writes that some of the Turkish gendarmes were nice enough to protect and feed the Armenians. But this is like saying there was no plan of genocide by the Germans because some German officials saved Jewish lives.

According to accounts from the U.S. ambassador Henry Morgenthau, the historian Arnold Toynbee, the humanitarian Johannes Lepsius, and others, the Turkish government had plans to annihilate the Armenians in their ancestral lands. Mr. Lewy wants more evidence. Perhaps if the Turkish government were more willing to open its archives for investigation, instead of, as Mr. Lewy notes, "threaten[ing] retaliation against anyone calling into question its own version of events," the issue could be settled once and for all.

JULIET DILANCHYAN-SETIAN
Dana Point, California

TO THE EDITOR:

I have little doubt that, were he alive, the great Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term "genocide" and whom Guenter Lewy quotes at the beginning of his article, would be leading the protest not only against Mr. Lewy's denial of the Armenian genocide but against COMMENTARY for agreeing to publish it. How the great have fallen! It was from COMMENTARY that I, like many others, first learned of the Armenian genocide in a classic article by Marjorie Housepian in September 1966, "The Unremembered Genocide." Over and over again Lemkin treated the murders of the Armenians decisively as genocide.

Mr. Lewy provides the deniers of genocide with at least two new rhetorical tools. First, set out the picture of denial that you want to create ("no authentic documentary evidence exists to prove the culpability of the central government . . . for the massacre"). Later, make a point of giving a small taste of some of the real facts to prove your open-mindedness and reliability ("It is true that no written record of Hitler's order for the Final Solution of the 'Jewish question' has ever been found, either") and then minimize the significance of this information, rolling back to the original thesis of denial.

Mr. Lewy's second strategy entails assigning appreciative, respectful adjectives to denialist statements ("documentary evidence suggests that the Ottoman government wanted to arrange an orderly process of deportation—even a relatively humane one") and subtly denigrating references to evidence of the genocide ("the book [presenting telegrams by Talaat Pasha ordering the killing of all Armenians irrespective of sex or age] is considered a forgery . . . by practically every Western student"; "these trials [which found members of the regime responsible for the massacres] suffered from serious deficiencies of due process"; "all of the original trial documents are lost, leaving nothing but copies").

Is Mr. Lewy aware that the Ottoman rulers in Palestine ordered and carried out the expulsion of Jews from Jaffa-Tel Aviv in 1914 (with more than 500 expelled) and again in 1917 (when several thousand were deported)? A serious number of deaths resulted from these forced uprootings, and the worst that was

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feared never came to be thanks only to international intervention. Who ordered the expulsions? Djemal Pasha, one of the triumvirate responsible for the Armenian genocide. On what grounds? Did the Jews of Palestine line up to join the Armenian rebels or the Russian army in the Ottoman-ruled city of Van? The Ottoman authorities stated in a Hebrew newspaper in 1915 that "it is only the Zionists and Zionism, that corrupt and incendiary mad rebellious element, . . . which we must vanquish."

The Ottomans also expelled nationalist Arabs from Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria. And a fate similar to that of the Armenians befell the other Christian populations of Ottoman Turkey, like the Assyrians and the Greeks. The Ottomans were on a rampage to get rid of any and all who were not like them.

ISRAEL W. CHARNY
International Association of Genocide Scholars
Jerusalem, Israel

TO THE EDITOR:

After reading Guenter Lewy's article documenting the terrible deaths suffered by Armenians at the hands of the Turks, but arguing that they were not victims of genocide, a phrase came to mind: "a distinction without a difference."

TOM BASTIEN
Denver, Colorado

TO THE EDITOR:

Shame on COMMENTARY for aiding and abetting Guenter Lewy in his denial of the Armenian Holocaust. Those who dishonor the dead and their descendants by supporting the makers of official history are, as Simone Weil said, taking "the murderers at their word."

DAVID DONABEDIAN
New York City

GUENTER LEWY writes:

The strident, not to say vitriolic, tone of the letters reacting to my article demonstrates once again the great difficulty of conducting a dispassionate discussion of the tragic events of 1915-16. The letters are rich in phrases like "absurdist" and "outrageous," but short on relevant historical facts. I am less than impressed by the unanimous vote of the International Association of Genocide Scholars that the Armenian case "was one of the major genocides of the modern era." The great majority of these self-proclaimed experts on Ottoman history have never set foot in an archive or done any other original research on the subject in question.

Peter Balakian, Dennis R. Papazian, and Charles Garo Ashjian insist on the "culpability of the central government" for carrying out "a plan of extermination," but they fail to support this charge with credible evidence. The reports of diplomats and missionaries on the scene document the horrors of the deportation process, but contain little solid information about who carried out the killings or who ordered them. Given the very large number of deaths and the observed complicity of many local officials in the murders, it is not surprising that not a few of these witnesses concluded that the high death toll was an intended outcome of the deportation decision. Still, well-informed as many foreign officials were about the events unfolding before their eyes, their insight into the mindset and the real intentions of the Young Turk leadership was necessarily limited. Indeed, to this day the inner workings of the Young Turk regime, and especially the role of the triumvirate of Enver, Talaat, and Djemal, are understood only very inadequately.

The fact that large numbers of Armenians lost their lives does not prove the existence of a premeditated plan of annihilation, and in and of itself tells us nothing about who is to be held responsible for these deaths. As I showed in my article, large numbers of Turkish civilians died as a result of severe shortages of food and epidemics, while large numbers of Turkish soldiers, especially the wounded in battle, perished for lack of adequate medical care and as a result of neglect and incompetence on the part of their own officers. Yet these deaths surely do not prove that the Ottoman government—ultimately responsible for all of these conditions—sought and intentionally caused the death of its own people and soldiers. Objective results are not the same as subjective intent.

Peter Balakian asserts that the record of the postwar Ottoman courts-martial, containing "the confessions of government and military officials," has been "validated by meticulous scholarship." However, as I demonstrate in my book, *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide*, the person whom Mr. Balakian (in his own book *The Burning Tigris*) credits with this work of validation, Vahakn Dadrian, is himself guilty of willful mistranslations, selective quotations, and other serious violations of scholarly ethics. Hilmar Kaiser, a historian who is strongly pro-Armenian in his approach, charges Dadrian with the same misdeeds and has concluded with considerable understatement that "serious scholars should be cautioned against accepting all of Dadrian's statements at face value." The fact that Mr. Balakian in his book calls Dadrian "the foremost scholar of the Armenian genocide" speaks volumes.

The British historian Andrew Mango has written that some of Balakian's assertions "would make any serious Ottoman historian's hair stand on end," and I join in this appraisal. Mr. Balakian should know that the Armenian revolutionary movement predated the massacres of 1894-96, and that the revolutionaries' inflammatory propaganda had helped bring about the mob violence. According to the American journalist Sidney Whitman, who witnessed the events, the pamphlets of the revolutionaries had called for an uprising to throw off the Turkish yoke. The Turks had taken these threats seriously, and this had led to the horrors and "the suffering of the innocent for the guilty." The strategy of the revolutionaries, as William L. Langer has convincingly argued, was to provoke the Turks to commit excesses, which would draw the attention of the Christian world and bring about European intervention on behalf of the Armenians. In information meant for foreign consumption, the revolutionaries portrayed their armed struggle against the Ottoman regime as defensive violence, while their own publications celebrated the heroic fight for national liberation.

Mr. Balakian misrepresents my description of the

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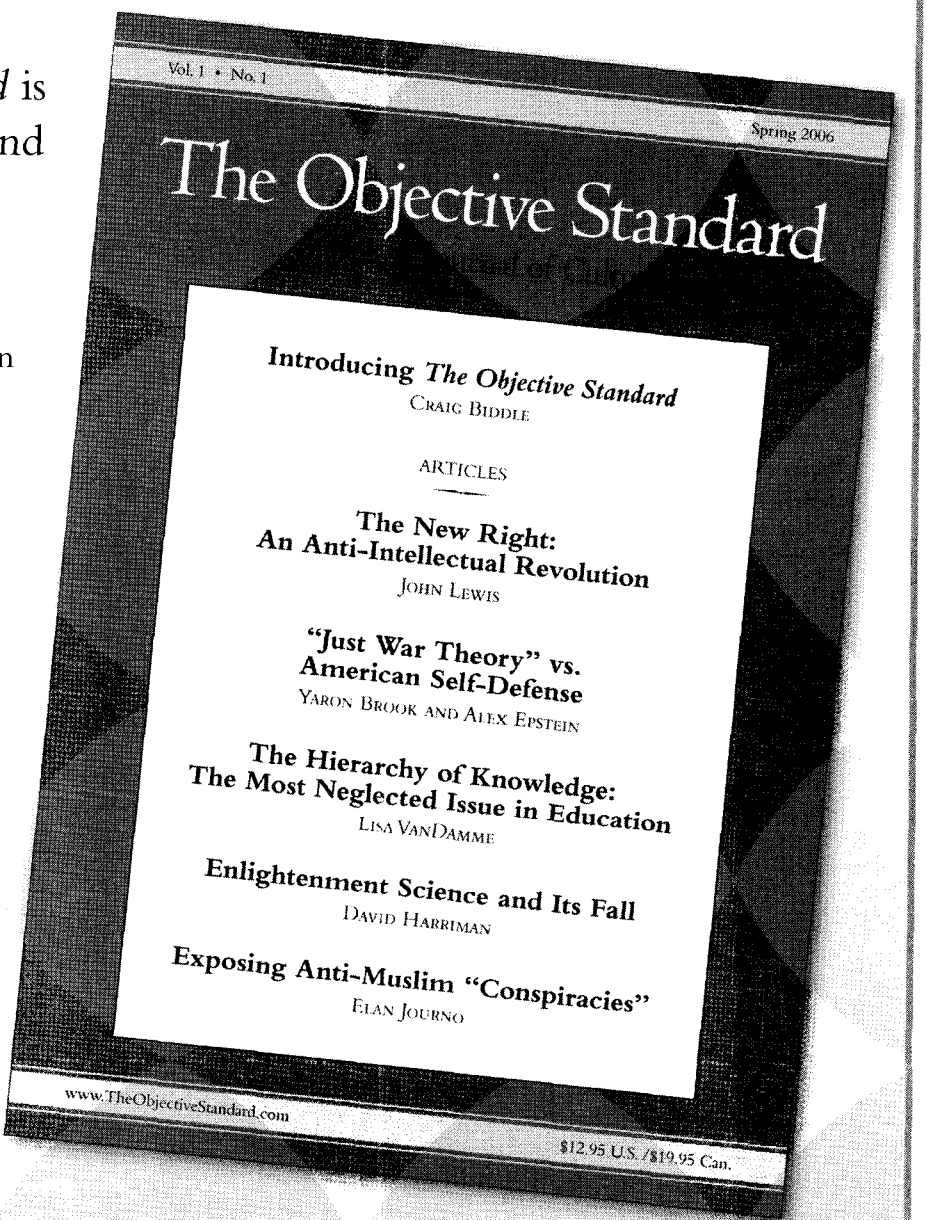

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deportation decision. I refer to the "many decrees commanding protection and compassionate treatment of the deportees," which indeed show a formal commitment to "a relatively humane" process (the word "relatively" is omitted by Mr. Balakian). But, of course, published decrees are not self-executing, and the actual course of the deportations bore little resemblance to the benevolent procedures contained in the law. My article speaks of the harrowing trek over mountains and through deserts where massive numbers of Armenians died of starvation and disease or were murdered. I note the callous attitude of the Ottoman government to its own people, which makes it unsurprising that this government showed little concern for "the terrible misery" that would result from deporting the bulk of the Armenians from their historical communities. To equate my position on these horrors with that of the Holocaust-denier David Irving makes for a rousing close to a letter already rich in abuse but is sheer demagoguery.

The pronouncements of Enver and Talaat indicating their destructive designs against the Armenians, which Charles Garo Ashjian quotes, are probably taken from *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*, first published in 1918. Yet this book had a strong propagandistic motive. It was written, as Morgenthau explained in a 1917 letter to President Woodrow Wilson, to convince the American people "of the necessity of carrying the war to a victorious conclusion." The book puts words into the mouths of various players that, with few exceptions, do not appear in the sources utilized by Morgenthau. The memoir portrays Talaat and Enver as ruthless villains, but in his diary, available at the Library of Congress manuscript collection, Morgenthau repeatedly praises the two ministers for their kindness. He had frequently invited them for meals at his home and gone riding with them in the countryside.

The demonization of Talaat and Enver in Morgenthau's book through the use of allegedly verbatim comments was a politically inspired device, probably the brainchild of the journalist Burton J. Hendrick, who ghost-wrote the book and received a share of the royalties. A highly favorable appraisal of Talaat is preserved also from the pen of William Peet, the American head of the international Armenian relief effort in Constantinople, who recalled that Talaat Pasha always "gave prompt attention to my requests, frequently greeting me as I called upon him in his office with the introductory remark: 'We are partners, what can I do for you today?'"

According to Bettina Fehr, my article "explores why the 1915-16 massacre of 650,000 to 800,000 Armenians might not be considered genocide" and "is oddly fixated" on whether this genocide was "planned." In fact, I speak of a *total* loss of life of around 650,000—the result of starvation, disease, and murder. We cannot know how many died from each of these causes, nor is there a way of separating out the Armenian deaths due to the guerrilla warfare waged by the Armenian revolutionaries. It was the Armenians' "unflagging devotion to the cause of the Allies," in the words of Boghos Nubar, the leader of the Armenian delegation to the postwar Paris peace conference, rather than any plan to destroy the Armenian community, that in my view explains the harsh reaction of the Ottoman regime. Whether the Holocaust grew out of a long-held plan by Hitler to destroy the Jews or developed incrementally as a result of gradual radicalization on the part of the Nazi leadership remains the subject of scholarly debate. In any case, large numbers of Armenians were not just "political enemies" but actively fought on the side of Turkey's wartime foes.

I agree with Juliet Dilanchyan-Setian about the importance of fully opening the Turkish archives. In January 1989, the Turkish foreign minister announced that the files would be opened, and many scholars, including some Armenians, have since been able to work with various Turkish documents. Yet there is evidence that some authors deemed politically reliable are granted privileged access long before the same materials are made available to others less favored. The principle of full access on an equitable basis, I hasten to add, should hold also for Armenian archives. For example, the archive of the Dashnak party, held in Boston, is said to be closed to those opposed to the Armenian point of view.

Where Israel W. Charny detects a design on the part of the Ottomans "to get rid of any and all who were not like them," I see various security measures, some more justified than others. Yet since even Mr. Charny stops short of calling these occurrences "genocide," I fail to discern the relevance of these other expulsions to the allegation of Armenian genocide. Moreover, Djemal Pasha, who according to Mr. Charny was "one of the triumvirate responsible for the Armenian genocide," in fact saved thousands of lives by diverting Armenians to southern Syria and Lebanon where there were no massacres. Djemal also ordered an effective relief program, as a result of which the vast majority of the deportees survived. These various interventions, aimed at moderating the hardships of the hapless Armenians, at the time earned him the nickname "Pasha of Armenia."

David Donabedian accuses me of dishonoring the dead and their descendants and faults COMMENTARY for "aiding and abetting" my "denial of the Armenian Holocaust." Such language, unfortunately all too prevalent, is used against anyone who dares question the Armenian version of the calamitous events of 1915-16. Distinguished scholars of Ottoman history like Roderic Davison, J.C. Hurewitz, Bernard Lewis, and Andrew Mango have rejected the appropriateness of the genocide label for those occurrences. Yet, ignoring this formidable array of learned opinion, Armenians and their supporters among so-called genocide scholars continue to assert with superb arrogance that the Armenian genocide is incontrovertible fact and "established history" that can be denied only by lackeys of the Turkish government or morally obtuse individuals. Unless and until there is a change in this attitude, I see little hope for ending this almost century-old conflict.

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The New Anti-Semitism

Who are its advocates? What are its goals?

The Holocaust, in which over six million Jews were brutally murdered by the Nazis and their enthusiastic collaborators, happened over 60 years ago. So terrific were the events that – even today, about two generations later – nobody would wish to identify himself with them. Yet, a new anti-Semitism is now rearing its head. It is important to be aware of it.

What are the facts?

Who are the new anti-Semites? The new anti-Semites do not publicly proclaim their desire to bring about a second Holocaust or to subject the Jews to mass murder or annihilation. The hatred is aimed against the state of Israel, which, according to the new anti-Semites, represents all that is evil in the world and which is the main violator of human rights and guilty of virtually every other abuse that can be conceived. This poison is now so widespread that a poll taken in Europe not too long ago found Israel to be the greatest menace to the peace of the world – far ahead of such murderous regimes as those of Iran or of North Korea.

> "...the viciousness, volume and consistency of this criticism against Israel is such that it cannot be considered as anything but anti-Semitism..."

The leaders and instigators of this new anti-Semitism are concentrated on the political left, its most active and vocal spokesmen being found in our prestige universities. Such is the anti-Zionist (anti-Semitic) focus of the left that, almost incomprehensibly, it includes a fair number of Jewish professors and other "intellectuals," not just here in the United States, but even in Israel itself.

Those on the extreme left call for the abolition of the State of Israel outright, although they do not tell us what they propose to do with the five million Israeli Jews. They would presumably be left to the tender mercies of the Arabs, who would, of course, have no greater joy than to emulate or perhaps even to "improve" on the Nazi model and to give "final solution(!) to the Jewish problem" once and for all. That isn't going to happen, of course, not because anybody in the world would lift a finger to prevent it, but because, fortunately, Israel is a very strong and most capable nation.

A death wish for Israel. In deference to "world opinion" and also to the wishes of the United States, Israel has allowed itself to be pressured into innumerable concessions to those who are sworn to destroy it. But it seems clear that, when the chips are really down, a most decisive response on the part of Israel can be expected. With the possible exception of Carthage during the Punic Wars, almost 2500 years ago, no country in the world, no country in recorded history, has ever been threatened with extinction. Israel is the one exception. Fueled by the extreme left, the "legitimacy" of Israel is a constant topic of discussion. The abolition of the "Zionist entity" gets serious attention, even in the hallowed halls of the United Nations. Iran feverishly pursues the Holy Grail of atomic weapons. Its president has publicly declared – not once, but repeatedly – that Israel is a "tumor" that must be excised and that it must be wiped off the map of the world. Medium-range missiles (so far, fortunately without atomic warheads) are being paraded through the streets of Teheran, with signs attached to them, shamelessly giving their destination as Jerusalem. A few eyebrows are being raised around the world, but otherwise nothing is being done about it.

Because the memory of the Nazi Holocaust still lingers after all these years, the new anti-Semitism is disguised as the socially more acceptable "anti-Zionism." It is pursued and propagated by the radical left. Every leftist demonstration – be it about the war in Iraq, against globalization, for or against whatever else – does inevitably include appeals against "Israeli subjugation of the Palestinians," the "occupation of Palestinian lands by Israel," or simply asks for the elimination of Israel. Sadly, quite a few Jews, having been saturated with leftism from their early years, participate in such demonstrations.

While the propagation of the new anti-Semitism by prestige universities started in Europe (mostly in England), it has found fertile ground in the universities of the United States. The active participation in the new anti-Semitism by the American clergy (beginning with the Presbyterians) is a scandalous reality.

Surely, not everybody who criticizes Israel is an anti-Semite. The actions of Israel, just as the actions of any other countries, are subject to examination and criticism. But the viciousness, volume and consistency of this criticism against Israel is such that it cannot be considered as anything but anti-Semitism -- the new anti-Semitism, disguised as anti-Israelism or anti-Zionism. The foolish professors and the hypocritical preachers are besotted by their leftism and by their hatred against Israel and America. Overt vilification of America has to remain muted – it's somewhat dangerous to be too outspoken about it – but Israel, perceived as the satrap and the handmaiden of the United States in the Middle East, is an easy target. Nobody should be fooled. Anti-Semitism is anti-Semitism in whichever way it may be disguised.

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America Abroad

TO THE EDITOR:

The notion of a Bush Doctrine, much celebrated by COMMENTARY's symposiasts, demands a certain oblivion as to its historical origins ["Defending and Advancing Freedom," November 2005]. For what began as the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq was given a hurried paint job to become a crusade for democracy. That is slapdashery, not a doctrine.

Several contributors would no doubt join in James Q. Wilson's assertion that "even if we had known that Iraq had no WMD's, it would have made little difference." That is quite untrue. The supposed presence of WMD's in Iraq was (and is) central to the legitimacy of the President's power to wage this war.

Congress was moved to authorize the campaign in Iraq by representations about WMD's. The joint resolution of October 2, 2002 emphasizes "the discovery that Iraq had large stockpiles of chemical weapons and a large-scale biological-weapons program, and that Iraq had an advanced nuclear-weapons-development program," and repeats that untruth throughout. Absent the warnings about WMD's, it is doubtful that the Bush Doctrine to democratize the Middle East would have elicited congressional support.

JOSEPH D. BECKER
New York City

TO THE EDITOR:

In his contribution to the November 2005 symposium, Owen Harries complains about President Bush's "simple and dangerous" statement that "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." But the logic of the President's view is unassailable.

In some wars, such as the one that Winston Churchill faced in 1940, it may be possible for a country to remain neutral, following a policy of impartiality toward both belligerent sides. A war against terrorism is different because terrorists, lacking a state of their own, seek sanctuaries where they can organize, train, and prepare for attacks. The government of a would-be neutral faces a clear choice—to avoid trouble with the terrorists by collaborating with them, at least to the extent of shutting its eyes to activities directed against other nations, or to protect its sovereignty by taking action against the terrorists' misuse of its territory.

In the latter case, the would-be neutral becomes (in effect if not officially) an ally of the United States in the anti-terrorist effort. In the former case, nominal neutrality becomes a cover for either active or passive complicity in terrorism—a policy of hostility to American interests, and indeed to the interests of Western civilization.

President Bush's recognition of this fact may have been "simple," as Mr. Harries says, but it was also realistic. Can it be so "dangerous" to speak the truth?

KENNETH H.W. HILBORN
University of Western Ontario
London, Canada

TO THE EDITOR:

Stanley Hoffmann's contribution to COMMENTARY's symposium favors high-minded platitudes over good judgment about painfully complex realities. He writes that preventive military action is illegal under international law unless there is a threat of imminent attack. If no such threat is evident, preemptive action will be seen as a form of aggression. Now this is a statement of the obvious that avoids the great problem of recent history: under what circumstances might a society justifiably feel threatened by imminent attack? After a true danger is averted, the awful possibilities that were faced cannot be revived in their full dimensions, leaving us prey to the claims of historical revisionism.

Mr. Hoffmann goes on to proclaim that, since we need allies, "unilateral prevention would be counterproductive, and encourage other actors to strike whenever they want. The result would be chaos." Does he really feel that the Saddam Husseins of this world would ever be deterred by examples of restraint against perceived danger? As for unilateral action, who would not want to have as many allies as possible? But what if potential allies are faint-hearted or for any other reason do not volunteer? Perhaps Mr. Hoffmann remembers the famous cartoon depicting Winston Churchill after the fall of France saying, "Very well, we'll go it alone."

M. DONALD COLEMAN
Mamaroneck, New York

TO THE EDITOR:

In his entry in COMMENTARY's symposium, Mark Helprin faults the Bush administration for being "in thrall to the most pressing and immediate" at the expense of a long-term vision. In the course of elaborating this charge, Mr. Helprin draws an analogy, writing that "because of their inability to sense the long term, chess players who focus on their pawns rather than their position usually lose."

But, of course, a player who focused on his pawns rather than on his position would not "usually lose," he would *always* lose. Chess employs feudal terms but is strikingly democratic: the eight pawns are every bit as important as the knights, bishops, rooks, and queens. It is meaningless to speak of pawn moves as somehow having short-term significance or an impact separate from that on the overall "position." The American grandmaster and psychoanalyst Reuben Fine once emphasized pawns' worth this way: "I'd rather have a pawn than a finger." He was absolutely right. Pawns, as the great Philidor said, "are the soul of chess."

Let us hope that Mr. Helprin's insights into global politics go deeper than his insights into chess.

SIEGFRIED JONES
Brooklyn, New York

Athens & Jerusalem

TO THE EDITOR:

In an era in which the classics of Western literature are sometimes dismissed as the outmoded works of dead white males, Hillel Halkin's remarkable essay, "Sailing to Ithaca" [November 2005], shows how the Bible and *The Odyssey* can enrich our thinking about the most complex issues in life. Even more important, in my view, is what Mr. Halkin teaches about the world of the ancient Greeks and that of the Bible—Athens and Jerusalem, as the traditions they spawned have been called.

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These were the two transformative civilizations of antiquity; no people encountering either for the first time could remain the same.

The two were brought together methodically in medieval philosophy, creating a dialectic that has dominated Western thought ever since. Their places of meeting have seen creativity at the highest levels.

What was the secret of the encounter by which Athens and Jerusalem became more than just their already immensely powerful selves? Numerous studies have been devoted to this question, of which two of the most famous are by Lev Shestov and Leo Strauss. The focus has usually been on the tension between reason and revelation, between analysis and inspiration, but Mr. Halkin supplies a clue in a different direction.

Taking his cue from Erich Auerbach's comparison of Odysseus' return to Ithaca with the binding of Isaac, he suggests that Odysseus embodies the hope of restoration, of the yearning to return home, to a world in which everything has indeed changed and no one remains the same but in which, somehow, nothing is different. As Mr. Halkin writes, by the end of *The Odyssey*, "time and age are vanquished."

The Bible, by contrast, suggests the possibility of reconciliation, of acknowledging change and guilt yet also of coming to terms with these burdens with the aid of an open-ended hope for the future. The Bible (if one may continue Mr. Halkin's nautical metaphor) teaches us how to deal with the wake of the past that each of us pulls behind, heading into the harbor. This message would be synthesized by Jews of antiquity into the concept of repentance (*teshuvah*), having the power to reverse misdeeds and allow one to sail away safe and free from the wreckage one has inflicted on God, the commandments, others, and oneself.

When these two broad concepts are engaged, when the hope of restoration encounters the promise of reconciliation, Athens and Jerusalem together create a world of intellectual ferment, cultural richness, and personal optimism—a world that, even in the 21st century, retains its power to move us.

ALBERT I. BAUMGARTEN
Bar Ilan University
Givat Shmuel, Israel

TO THE EDITOR:

Back when I was teaching undergraduates instead of seminarians, I began my "Introduction to Religious Studies" course with Homer's *Iliad*, not just to do my bit for cultural literacy but also so that I could teach Simone Weil's famous essay "*The Iliad*, or the Poem of Force," regarded by many as the finest interpretation of that epic ever written. Although I hardly have the expertise to claim that Hillel Halkin's "Sailing to Ithaca" is the finest essay on *The Odyssey* ever written, I can at least say that if I were still teaching undergraduates, I would want to add *The Odyssey* to my syllabus, simply so that I might teach "Sailing to Ithaca" as well.

Both epics can prove highly disconcerting to modern sensibilities; but with the right depth of insight, it is still possible to show Homer's greatness without either apologizing for his "sexism" or turning him into a parable for our allegedly more enlightened times. Mr. Halkin has restored my admiration for what genuine literary criticism can accomplish.

EDWARD T. OAKES, S.J.
University of St. Mary of the Lake
Mundelein, Illinois

HILLEL HALKIN writes:

I thank Albert Baumgarten and Father Oakes for their thoughtful and appreciative responses.

The Blacklist

TO THE EDITOR:

Arguments about the Hollywood blacklist inevitably return to certain crucial facts, so obviously it is important to get those facts right, however pedantic it might seem to point them out. Mark Falcoff's otherwise fine review of *Behind the Blacklist* by Allis and Ronald Radosh [November 2005] contains two errors, one minor and one rather less so.

To begin with the minor: Mr. Falcoff—either following the authors or simply making his own mistake—states that the 1944 film *Song of Russia* was "written by [Lillian] Hellman herself," and goes on to quote the Radoshes' description of the film as "a thriving collective farm of healthy, happy Soviet peasants, all of whom look and act like Americans, and who frequently and spontaneously burst into silly songs." In fact, this is a description of the film *North Star*, which was indeed written by Hellman and filled with Aaron Copland songs. *Song of Russia* was written by Richard Collins and Paul Jarrico (who was later blacklisted himself and went on independently to produce that darling of left-wing agitprop films, *Salt of the Earth*). Perhaps the word "song" in the title misled Falcoff; but in *Song of Russia*, we are presented with Robert Taylor as an American orchestra conductor who finds artistic fulfillment and true love in Stalin's Moscow. Revealingly, the film is awash in the music of Tchaikovsky rather than of Shostakovich.

The second error is more serious. Mr. Falcoff says that the Hollywood Ten, "following Communist-party instructions to appear before the [House Un-American Activities] committee and make a spectacle of themselves by invoking the Fifth Amendment, ended up serving prison sentences for contempt of Congress." In fact, the Ten invoked the First Amendment, claiming that their political opinions were protected as free speech and hence (in a touching paradox) a strictly private matter. It was only after the Supreme Court ruled that they were not protected under the First Amendment that later unfriendly witnesses invoked the Fifth, which kept them out of jail though not free of the blacklist.

Small distinctions, perhaps, but when wading through such treacherous waters as the blacklist era, it helps to have at least a few firm stones to step upon.

ROBERT NASON
Whitestone, New York

MARK FALCOFF writes:

I stand corrected on both counts.

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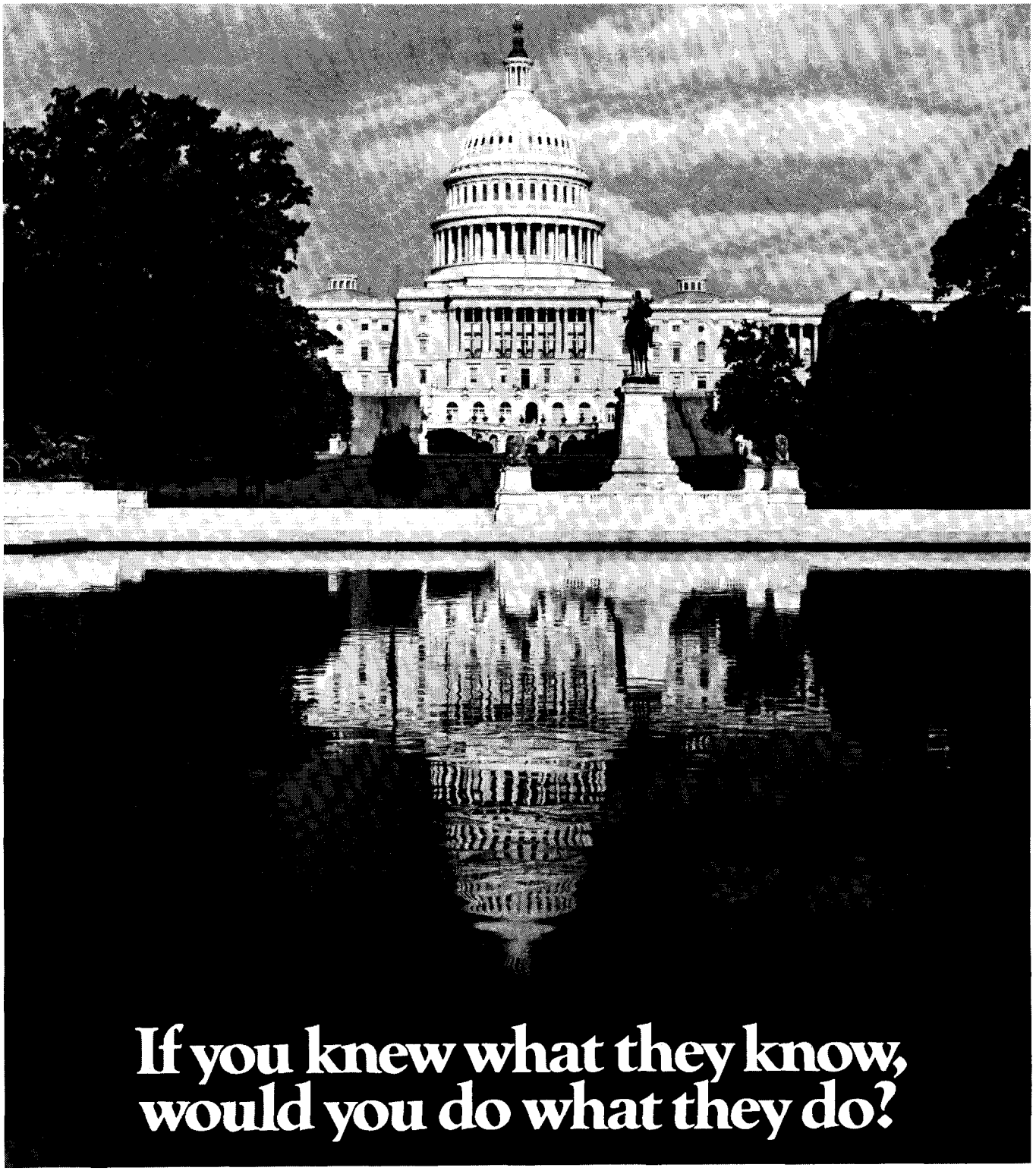

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Commentary
February 2006

How Divided Are We?

James Q. Wilson

THE 2004 ELECTION left our country deeply divided over whether our country is deeply divided. For some, America is indeed a polarized nation, perhaps more so today than at any time in living memory. In this view, yesterday's split over Bill Clinton has given way to today's even more acrimonious split between Americans who detest George Bush and Americans who detest John Kerry, and similar divisions will persist as long as angry liberals and angry conservatives continue to confront each other across the political abyss. Others, however, believe that most Americans are moderate centrists, who, although disagreeing over partisan issues in 2004, harbor no deep ideological hostility. I take the former view.

By polarization I do not have in mind partisan disagreements alone. These have always been with us. Since popular voting began in the 19th century, scarcely any winning candidate has received more than 60 percent of the vote, and very few losers have received less than 40 percent. Inevitably, Americans will differ over who should be in the White House. But this does not necessarily mean they are polarized.

By polarization I mean something else: an intense commitment to a candidate, a culture, or an ideology that sets people in one group definitively apart from people in another, rival group. Such a condition is revealed when a candidate for public office is regarded by a competitor and his supporters not simply as wrong but as corrupt or wicked; when one way of thinking about the world is assumed to be morally superior to any other way; when one set of political beliefs is considered to be entirely correct and a rival set wholly wrong. In extreme form, as defined by Richard Hofstadter in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1965), polarization can entail the belief that the other side is in thrall to a secret conspiracy that is using devious means to obtain control over society. Today's versions might go like this: "Liberals employ their dominance of the media, the universities, and Hollywood to enforce a radically secular agenda"; or, "conservatives, working through the religious Right and the big corporations, conspired with their hired neocon advisers to invade Iraq for the sake of oil."

POLARIZATION IS not new to this country. It is hard to imagine a society more divided than ours was in 1800, when pro-British, pro-commerce New Englanders supported John Adams for the presidency while pro-French, pro-agriculture Southerners backed Thomas Jefferson. One sign of this hostility was the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798; another was that in 1800, just as

JAMES Q. WILSON, *a veteran contributor to* COMMENTARY, *is the Ronald Reagan professor of public policy at Pepperdine University in California. The present essay, in somewhat different form, was delivered at Harvard last year and appears here by permission of the Tanner Lectures on Human Values, University of Utah.*

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in 2000, an extremely close election was settled by a struggle in one state (New York in 1800, Florida in 2000).

The fierce contest between Abraham Lincoln and George McClellan in 1864 signaled another national division, this one over the conduct of the Civil War. But thereafter, until recently, the nation ceased to be polarized in that sense. Even in the half-century from 1948 to (roughly) 1996, marked as it was by sometimes strong expressions of feeling over whether the presidency should go to Harry Truman or Thomas Dewey, to Dwight Eisenhower or Adlai Stevenson, to John F. Kennedy or Richard Nixon, to Nixon or Hubert Humphrey, and so forth, opinion surveys do not indicate widespread detestation of one candidate or the other, or of the people who supported him.

Now they do. Today, many Americans and much of the press regularly speak of the President as a dimwit, a charlatan, or a knave. A former Democratic presidential candidate has asserted that Bush "betrayed" America by launching a war designed to benefit his friends and corporate backers. A senior Democratic Senator has characterized administration policy as a series of "lies, lies, and more lies" and has accused Bush of plotting a "mindless, needless, senseless, and reckless" war. From the other direction, similar expressions of popular disdain have been directed at Senator John Kerry (and before him at President Bill Clinton); if you have not heard them, that may be because (unlike many of my relatives) you do not live in Arkansas or Texas or other locales where the *New York Times* is not read. In these places, Kerry is widely spoken of as a scoundrel.

In the 2004 presidential election, over two-thirds of Kerry voters said they were motivated explicitly by the desire to defeat Bush. By early 2005, President Bush's approval rating, which stood at 94 percent among Republicans, was only 18 percent among Democrats—the largest such gap in the history of the Gallup poll. These data, moreover, were said to reflect a mutual revulsion between whole geographical sections of the country, the so-called Red (Republican) states versus the so-called Blue (Democratic) states. As summed up by the distinguished social scientist who writes humor columns under the name of Dave Barry, residents of Red states are "ignorant racist fascist knuckle-dragging NASCAR-obsessed cousin-marrying road-kill-eating tobacco-juice-dribbling gun-fondling religious fanatic rednecks," while Blue-state residents are "godless unpatriotic pierced-nose Volvo-driving France-loving leftwing Communist latte-sucking tofu-chomping holistic-wacko neurotic vegan weenie perverts."

TO BE sure, other scholars differ with Dr. Barry. To them, polarization, although a real enough phenomenon, is almost entirely confined to a small number of political elites and members of Congress. In *Culture War?* (2004), which bears the subtitle "The Myth of a Polarized America," Morris Fiorina of Stanford argues that policy differences between voters in Red and Blue states are really quite small, and that most are in general agreement even on issues like abortion and homosexuality.

But the extent of polarization cannot properly be measured by the voting results in Red and Blue states. Many of these states are in fact deeply divided internally between liberal and conservative areas, and gave the nod to one candidate or the other by only a narrow margin. Inferring the views of individual citizens from the gross results of presidential balloting is a questionable procedure.

Nor does Fiorina's analysis capture the very real and very deep division over an issue like abortion. Between 1973, when *Roe* v. *Wade* was decided, and now, he writes, there has been no change in the degree to which people will or will not accept any one of six reasons to justify an abortion: (1) the woman's health is endangered; (2) she became pregnant because of a rape; (3) there is a strong chance of a fetal defect; (4) the family has a low income; (5) the woman is not married; (6) and the woman simply wants no more children. Fiorina may be right about that. Nevertheless, only about 40 percent of all Americans will support abortion for any of the last three reasons in his series, while over 80 percent will support it for one or another of the first three.

In other words, almost all Americans are for abortion in the case of maternal emergency, but fewer than half if it is simply a matter of the mother's preference. That split—a profoundly important one—has remained in place for over three decades, *and* it affects how people vote. In 2000 and again in 2004, 70 percent of those who thought abortion should always be legal voted for Al Gore or John Kerry, while over 70 percent of those who thought it should always be illegal voted for George Bush.

Division is just as great over other high-profile issues. Polarization over the war in Iraq, for example, is more pronounced than any war-related controversy in at least a half-century. In the fall of 2005, according to Gallup, 81 percent of Demo-

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crats but only 20 percent of Republicans thought the war in Iraq was a mistake. During the Vietnam war, by contrast, itself a famously contentious cause, there was more unanimity across party lines, whether for or against: in late 1968 and early 1969, about equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans thought the intervention there was a mistake. Pretty much the same was true of Korea: in early 1951, 44 percent of Democrats and 61 percent of Republicans thought the war was a mistake—a partisan split, but nowhere near as large as the one over our present campaign in Iraq.

Polarization, then, is real. But what explains its growth? And has it spread beyond the political elites to influence the opinions and attitudes of ordinary Americans?

The answer to the first question, I suspect, can be found in the changing politics of Congress, the new competitiveness of the mass media, and the rise of new interest groups.

That Congress is polarized seems beyond question. When, in 1998, the House deliberated whether to impeach President Clinton, all but four Republican members voted for at least one of the impeachment articles, while only five Democrats voted for even one. In the Senate, 91 percent of Republicans voted to convict on at least one article; every single Democrat voted for acquittal.

The impeachment issue was not an isolated case. In 1993, President Clinton's budget passed both the House and the Senate without a single Republican vote in favor. The same deep partisan split occurred over taxes and supplemental appropriations. Nor was this a blip: since 1950, there has been a steady increase in the percentage of votes in Congress pitting most Democrats against most Republicans.

In the midst of the struggle to pacify Iraq, Howard Dean, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee, said the war could not be won and Nancy Pelosi, the leader of the House Democrats, endorsed the view that American forces should be brought home as soon as possible. By contrast, although there was congressional grumbling (mostly by Republicans) about Korea and complaints (mostly by Democrats) about Vietnam, and although Senator George Aiken of Vermont famously proposed that we declare victory and withdraw, I cannot remember party leaders calling for unconditional surrender.

The reasons for the widening fissures in Congress are not far to seek. Each of the political parties was once a coalition of dissimilar forces: liberal Northern Democrats and conservative Southern Democrats, liberal coastal Republicans and conservative Midwestern Republicans. No longer; the realignments of the South (now overwhelmingly Republican) and of New England (now strongly Democratic) have all but eliminated legislators who deviate from the party's leadership. Conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans are endangered species now approaching extinction. At the same time, the ideological gap between the parties is growing: if there was once a large overlap between Democrats and Republicans—remember "Tweedledum and Tweedledee"?—today that congruence has almost disappeared. By the late 1990's, virtually every Democrat was more liberal than virtually every Republican.

The result has been not only intense partisanship but a sharp rise in congressional incivility. In 1995, a Republican-controlled Senate passed a budget that President Clinton proceeded to veto; in the loggerhead that followed, many federal agencies shut down (in a move that backfired on the Republicans). Congressional debates have seen an increase not only in heated exchanges but in the number of times a representative's words are either ruled out of order or "taken down" (that is, written by the clerk and then read aloud, with the offending member being asked if he or she wishes to withdraw them).

It has been suggested that congressional polarization is exacerbated by new districting arrangements that make each House seat safe for either a Democratic or a Republican incumbent. If only these seats were truly competitive, it is said, more centrist legislators would be elected. That seems plausible, but David C. King of Harvard has shown that it is wrong: in the House, the more competitive the district, the more extreme the views of the winner. This odd finding is apparently the consequence of a nomination process dominated by party activists. In primary races, where turnout is low (and seems to be getting lower), the ideologically motivated tend to exercise a preponderance of influence.

All this suggests a situation very unlike the half-century before the 1990's, if perhaps closer to certain periods in the 18th and 19th centuries. Then, too, incivility was common in Congress, with members not only passing the most scandalous remarks about each other but on occasion striking their rivals with canes or fists. Such partisan feeling ran highest when Congress was deeply divided over slavery before the Civil War and over Reconstruction after it. Today the issues are different, but the emotions are not dissimilar.

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NEXT, THE mass media. Not only are they themselves increasingly polarized, but consumers are well aware of it and act on that awareness. Fewer people now subscribe to newspapers or watch the network evening news. Although some of this decline may be explained by a preference for entertainment over news, some undoubtedly reflects the growing conviction that the mainstream press generally does not tell the truth, or at least not the whole truth.

In part, media bias feeds into, and off, an increase in business competition. In the 1950's, television news amounted to a brief 30-minute interlude in the day's programming, and not a very profitable one at that; for the rest of the time, the three networks supplied us with westerns and situation comedies. Today, television news is a vast, growing, and very profitable venture by the many broadcast and cable outlets that supply news twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

The news we get is not only more omnipresent, it is also more competitive and hence often more adversarial. When there were only three television networks, and radio stations were forbidden by the fairness doctrine from broadcasting controversial views, the media gravitated toward the middle of the ideological spectrum, where the large markets could be found. But now that technology has created cable news and the Internet, and now that the fairness doctrine has by and large been repealed, many media outlets find their markets at the ideological extremes.

Here is where the sharper antagonism among political leaders and their advisers and associates comes in. As one journalist has remarked about the change in his profession, "We don't deal in facts [any longer], but in attributed opinions." Or, these days, in unattributed opinions. And those opinions are more intensely rivalrous than was once the case.

The result is that, through commercial as well as ideological self-interest, the media contribute heavily to polarization. Broadcasters are eager for stories to fill their round-the-clock schedules, and at the same time reluctant to trust the government as a source for those stories. Many media outlets are clearly liberal in their orientation; with the arrival of Fox News and the growth of talk radio, many are now just as clearly conservative.

The evidence of liberal bias in the mainstream media is very strong. The Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) has been systematically studying television broadcasts for a quarter-century. In the 2004 presidential campaign, John Kerry received more favorable mentions than any presidential candidate in CMPA's history, especially during the month before election day. This is not new: since 1980 (and setting aside the recent advent of Fox News), the Democratic candidate has received more favorable mentions than the Republican candidate in every race except the 1988 contest between Michael Dukakis and George H. W. Bush. A similarly clear orientation characterizes weekly newsmagazines like *Time* and *Newsweek*.

For its part, talk radio is listened to by about one-sixth of the adult public, and that one-sixth is made up mostly of conservatives.* National Public Radio has an audience of about the same size; it is disproportionately liberal. The same breakdown affects cable-television news, where the rivalry is between CNN (and MSNBC) and Fox News. Those who watch CNN are more likely to be Democrats than Republicans; the reverse is emphatically true of Fox. As for news and opinion on the Internet, which has become an important source for college graduates in particular, it, too, is largely polarized along political and ideological lines, emphasized even more by the culture that has grown up around news blogs.

At one time, our culture was only weakly affected by the media because news organizations had only a few points of access to us and were largely moderate and audience-maximizing enterprises. Today the media have many lines of access, and reflect both the maximization of controversy and the cultivation of niche markets. Once the media talked to us; now they shout at us.

AND THEN there are the interest groups. In the past, the major ones—the National Association of Manufacturers, the Chamber of Commerce, and labor organizations like the AFL-CIO—were concerned with their own material interests. They are still active, but the loudest messages today come from very different sources and have a very different cast to them. They are issued by groups concerned with social and cultural matters like civil rights, managing the environment, alternatives to the public schools, the role of women, access to firearms, and so forth, and they directly influence the way people view politics.

Interest groups preoccupied with material concerns can readily find ways to arrive at compromise solutions to their differences; interest groups divided by issues of rights or morality find compro-

* The political disposition of most radio talk-show hosts is explained by William G. Mayer in "Why Talk Radio Is Conservative," *Public Interest*, Summer 2004.

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mise very difficult. The positions taken by many of these groups and their supporters, often operating within the two political parties, profoundly affect the selection of candidates for office. In brief, it is hard to imagine someone opposed to abortion receiving the Democratic nomination for President, or someone in favor of it receiving the Republican nomination.

Outside the realm of party politics, interest groups also file briefs in important court cases and can benefit from decisions that in turn help shape the political debate. Abortion became a hot controversy in the 1970's not because the American people were already polarized on the matter but because their (mainly centrist) views were not consulted; instead, national policy was determined by the Supreme Court in a decision, *Roe* v. *Wade*, that itself reflected a definition of "rights" vigorously promoted by certain well-defined interest groups.

Polarization not only is real and has increased, but it has also spread to rank-and-file voters through elite influence.

In *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (1992), John R. Zaller of UCLA listed a number of contemporary issues—homosexuality, a nuclear freeze, the war in Vietnam, busing for school integration, the 1990-91 war to expel Iraq from Kuwait—and measured the views held about them by politically aware citizens. (By "politically aware," Zaller meant people who did well answering neutral factual questions about politics.) His findings were illuminating.

Take the Persian Gulf war. Iraq had invaded Kuwait in August 1990. From that point through the congressional elections in November 1990, scarcely any elite voices were raised to warn against anything the United States might contemplate doing in response. Two days after the mid-term elections, however, President George H.W. Bush announced that he was sending many more troops to the Persian Gulf. This provoked strong criticism from some members of Congress, especially Democrats.

As it happens, a major public-opinion survey was under way just as these events were unfolding. Before criticism began to be voiced in Congress, both registered Democrats and registered Republicans had supported Bush's vaguely announced intention of coming to the aid of Kuwait; the more politically aware they were, the greater their support. *After* the onset of elite criticism, the support of Republican voters went up, but Democratic support flattened out. As Bush became more vigorous in enunciating his aims, politically aware voters began to differ sharply, with Democratic support declining and Republican support increasing further.

Much the same pattern can be seen in popular attitudes toward the other issues studied by Zaller. As political awareness increases, attitudes split apart, with, for example, highly aware liberals favoring busing and job guarantees and opposing the war in Vietnam, and highly aware conservatives opposing busing and job guarantees and supporting the war in Vietnam.*

But why should this be surprising? To imagine that extremist politics has been confined to the chattering classes is to believe that Congress, the media, and American interest groups operate in an ideological vacuum. I find that assumption implausible.

As for the extent to which these extremist views have spread, that is probably best assessed by looking not at specific issues but at enduring political values and party preferences. In 2004, only 12 percent of Democrats approved of George Bush; at earlier periods, by contrast, three to four times as many Democrats approved of Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, and Dwight D. Eisenhower. Over the course of about two decades, in other words, party affiliation had come to exercise a critical influence over what people thought about a sitting President.

The same change can be seen in the public's view of military power. Since the late 1980's, Republicans have been more willing than Democrats to say that "the best way to ensure peace is through military strength." By the late 1990's and on into 2003, well over two-thirds of all Republicans agreed with this view, but far fewer than half of all Democrats did. In 2005, three-fourths of all Democrats but fewer than a third of all Republicans told pollsters that good diplomacy was the best way to ensure peace. In the same survey, two-thirds of all Republicans but only one fourth of all Democrats said they would fight for this country "whether it is right or wrong."

Unlike in earlier years, the parties are no longer seen as Tweedledum and Tweedledee. To the contrary, as they sharpen their ideological differences, attentive voters have sharpened *their* ideological

* True, the "elite effect" may not be felt across the board. With most of the issues Zaller investigated, even well-informed citizens would have had little first-hand experience, and so their minds were of necessity open to the influence of their "betters." Results might have been different had he measured their views on matters about which most Americans believe themselves to be personally well-informed: crime, inflation, drug abuse, or their local schools.

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differences. They now like either the Democrats or the Republicans more than they once did, and are less apt to feel neutral toward either one.

How deep does this polarization reach? As measured by opinion polls, the gap between Democrats and Republicans was twice as great in 2004 as in 1972. In fact, rank-and-file Americans disagree more strongly today than did politically active Americans in 1972.

To be sure, this mass polarization involves only a minority of all voters, but the minority is sizable, and a significant part of it is made up of the college-educated. As Marc Hetherington of Vanderbilt puts it: "people with the greatest ability to assimilate new information, those with more formal education, are most affected by elite polarization." And that cohort has undeniably grown.

In 1900, only 10 percent of all young Americans went to high school. My father, in common with many men his age in the early 20th century, dropped out of school after the eighth grade. Even when I graduated from college, the first in my family to do so, fewer than one-tenth of all Americans over the age of twenty-five had gone that far. Today, 84 percent of adult Americans have graduated from high school and nearly 27 percent have graduated from college. This extraordinary growth in schooling has produced an ever larger audience for political agitation.

Ideologically, an even greater dividing line than undergraduate education is postgraduate education. People who have proceeded beyond college seem to be very different from those who stop with a high-school or college diploma. Thus, about a sixth of all voters describe themselves as liberals, but the figure for those with a postgraduate degree is well over a quarter. In mid-2004, about half of all voters trusted George Bush; less than a third of those with a postgraduate education did. In November of the same year, when over half of all college graduates voted for Bush, well over half of the smaller cohort who had done postgraduate work voted for Kerry. According to the Pew Center for Research on the People and the Press, more than half of all Democrats with a postgraduate education supported the antiwar candidacy of Howard Dean.

The effect of postgraduate education is reinforced by being in a profession. Between 1900 and 1960, write John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira in *The Emerging Democratic Majority* (2002), professionals voted pretty much the same way as business managers; by 1988, the former began supporting Democrats while the latter supported Republicans. On the other hand, the effect of postgraduate education seems to outweigh the effect of affluence. For most voters, including college graduates, having higher incomes means becoming more conservative; not so for those with a postgraduate education, whose liberal predilections are immune to the wealth effect.

THE RESULTS of this linkage between ideology, on the one hand, and congressional polarization, media influence, interest-group demands, and education on the other are easily read in the commentary surrounding the 2004 election. In their zeal to denigrate the President, liberals, pronounced one conservative pundit, had "gone quite around the twist." According to liberal spokesmen, conservatives with their "religious intolerance" and their determination to rewrite the Constitution had so befuddled their fellow Americans that a "great nation was felled by a poisonous nut."

If such wholesale slurs are not signs of polarization, then the word has no meaning. To a degree that we cannot precisely measure, and over issues that we cannot exactly list, polarization has seeped down into the public, where it has assumed the form of a culture war. The sociologist James Davison Hunter, who has written about this phenomenon in a mainly religious context, defines culture war as "political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding." Such conflicts, he writes, which can involve "fundamental ideas about who we are as Americans," are waged both across the religious/secular divide and within religions themselves, where those with an "orthodox" view of moral authority square off against those with a "progressive" view.

To some degree, this terminology is appropriate to today's political situation as well. We are indeed in a culture war in Hunter's sense, though I believe this war is itself but another component, or another symptom, of the larger ideological polarization that has us in its grip. Conservative thinking on political issues has religious roots, but it also has roots that are fully as secular as anything on the Left. By the same token, the liberal attack on conservatives derives in part from an explicitly "progressive" religious orientation—liberal Protestantism or Catholicism, or Reform Judaism—but in part from the same secular sources shared by many conservatives.

BUT WHAT, one might ask, is wrong with having well-defined parties arguing vigorously about the issues that matter? Is it possible that polarized politics is a good thing, encouraging sharp debate and clear positions? Perhaps that is true on those is-

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sues where reasonable compromises can be devised. But there are two limits to such an arrangement.

First, many Americans believe that unbridgeable political differences have prevented leaders from addressing the problems they were elected to address. As a result, distrust of government mounts, leading to an alienation from politics altogether. The steep decline in popular approval of our national officials has many causes, but surely one of them is that ordinary voters agree among themselves more than political elites agree with each other—and the elites are far more numerous than they once were.

In the 1950's, a committee of the American Political Science Association (APSA) argued the case for a "responsible" two-party system. The model the APSA had in mind was the more ideological and therefore more "coherent" party system of Great Britain. At the time, scarcely anyone thought our parties could be transformed in such a supposedly salutary direction. Instead, as Governor George Wallace of Alabama put it in his failed third-party bid for the presidency, there was not a "dime's worth of difference" between Democrats and Republicans.

What Wallace forgot was that, however alike the parties were, the public liked them that way. A half-century ago, Tweedledum and Tweedledee enjoyed the support of the American people; the more different they have become, the greater has been the drop in popular confidence in both them and the federal government.

A final drawback of polarization is more profound. Sharpened debate is arguably helpful with respect to domestic issues, but not for the management of important foreign and military matters. The United States, an unrivaled superpower with unparalleled responsibilities for protecting the peace and defeating terrorists, is now forced to discharge those duties with its own political house in disarray.

We fought World War II as a united nation, even against two enemies (Germany and Italy) that had not attacked us. We began the wars in Korea and Vietnam with some degree of unity, too, although it was eventually whittled away. By the early 1990's, when we expelled Iraq from Kuwait, we had to do so over the objections of congressional critics; the first President Bush avoided putting the issue to Congress altogether. In 2003 we toppled Saddam Hussein in the face of catcalls from many domestic leaders and opinion-makers. Now, in stabilizing Iraq and helping that country create a new free government, we have proceeded despite intense and mounting criticism, much of it voiced by politicians who before the war agreed that Saddam Hussein was an evil menace in possession of weapons of mass destruction and that we had to remove him.

Denmark or Luxembourg can afford to exhibit domestic anguish and uncertainty over military policy; the United States cannot. A divided America encourages our enemies, disheartens our allies, and saps our resolve—potentially to fatal effect. What General Giap of North Vietnam once said of us is even truer today: America cannot be defeated on the battlefield, but it can be defeated at home. Polarization is a force that can defeat us.

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On the Origins of Life

David Berlinski

For those who are studying aspects of the origin of life, the question no longer seems to be whether life could have originated by chemical processes involving non-biological components but, rather, what pathway might have been followed.

—National Academy of Sciences (1996)

It is 1828, a year that encompassed the death of Shaka, the Zulu king, the passage in the United States of the Tariff of Abominations, and the battle of Las Piedras in South America. It is, as well, the year in which the German chemist Friedrich Wöhler announced the synthesis of urea from cyanic acid and ammonia.

Discovered by H.M. Roulle in 1773, urea is the chief constituent of urine. Until 1828, chemists had assumed that urea could be produced only by a living organism. Wöhler provided the most convincing refutation imaginable of this thesis. His synthesis of urea was noteworthy, he observed with some understatement, because "it furnishes an example of the artificial production of an organic, indeed a so-called animal substance, from inorganic materials."

Wöhler's work initiated a revolution in chemistry; but it also initiated a revolution in thought. To the extent that living systems are chemical in their nature, it became possible to imagine that they might be chemical in their origin; and if chemical in their origin, then plainly physical in their nature, and hence a part of the universe that can be explained in terms of "the model for what science should be."*

In a letter written to his friend, Sir Joseph Hooker, several decades after Wöhler's announcement, Charles Darwin allowed himself to speculate. Invoking "a warm little pond" bubbling up in the dim inaccessible past, Darwin imagined that given "ammonia and phosphoric salts, light, heat, electricity, etc. present," the spontaneous genera-

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* I used this phrase, borrowed from the mathematicians J.H. Hubbard and B.H. West, in "On the Origins of the Mind" (Commentary, November 2004). The idea that science must conform to a certain model of inquiry is familiar. Hubbard and West identify that model with differential equations, the canonical instruments throughout physics and chemistry.

But the essentials of the model, it seems to me, lie less with the particular means in which it is expressed and more with the constraints that it must meet. The idea behind the "model for what science should be" is that whatever may be a system's initial conditions, or starting point, the laws of its development must be both unique and stable. When they are, the system that results is well posed, and so a proper object of contemplation.

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tion of a "protein compound" might follow, with this compound "ready to undergo still more complex changes" and so begin Darwinian evolution itself.

Time must now be allowed to pass. Shall we say 60 years or so? Working independently, J.B.S. Haldane in England and A.I. Oparin in the Soviet Union published influential studies concerning the origin of life. Before the era of biological evolution, they conjectured, there must have been an era of *chemical* evolution taking place in something like a pre-biotic soup. A reducing atmosphere prevailed, dominated by methane and ammonia, in which hydrogen atoms, by donating their electrons (and so "reducing" their number), promoted various chemical reactions. Energy was at hand in the form of electrical discharges, and thereafter complex hydrocarbons appeared on the surface of the sea.

The publication of Stanley Miller's paper, "A Production of Amino Acids Under Possible Primitive Earth Conditions," in the May 1953 issue of *Science* completed the inferential arc initiated by Friedrich Wöhler 125 years earlier. Miller, a graduate student, did his work at the instruction of Harold Urey. Because he did not contribute directly to the experiment, Urey insisted that his name not be listed on the paper itself. But their work is now universally known as the Miller-Urey experiment, providing evidence that a good deed can be its own reward.

By drawing inferences about pre-biotic evolution from ordinary chemistry, Haldane and Oparin had opened an imaginary door. Miller and Urey barged right through. Within the confines of two beakers, they re-created a simple pre-biotic environment. One beaker held water; the other, connected to the first by a closed system of glass tubes, held hydrogen cyanide, water, methane, and ammonia. The two beakers were thus assumed to simulate the pre-biotic ocean and its atmosphere. Water in the first could pass by evaporation to the gases in the second, with vapor returning to the original alembic by means of condensation.

Then Miller and Urey allowed an electrical spark to pass continually through the mixture of gases in the second beaker, the gods of chemistry controlling the reactions that followed with very little or no human help. A week after they had begun their experiment, Miller and Urey discovered that in addition to a tarry residue—its most notable product—their potent little planet had yielded a number of the amino acids found in living systems.

The effect among biologists (and the public) was electrifying—all the more so because of the experiment's methodological genius. Miller and Urey had done nothing. Nature had done everything. The experiment alone had parted the cloud of unknowing.

The Double Helix

In April 1953, just four weeks before Miller and Urey would report their results in *Science*, James Watson and Francis Crick published a short letter in *Nature* entitled "A Structure for Deoxyribose Nucleic Acid." The letter is now famous, if only because the exuberant Crick, at least, was persuaded that he and Watson had discovered the secret of life. In this he was mistaken: the secret of life, along with its meaning, remains hidden. But in deducing the structure of deoxyribose nucleic acid (DNA) from X-ray diffraction patterns and various chemical details, Watson and Crick *had* discovered the way in which life at the molecular level replicates itself.

Formed as a double helix, DNA, Watson and Crick argued, consists of two twisted strings facing each other and bound together by struts. Each string comprises a series of four nitrogenous bases: adenine (A), guanine (G), thymine (T), and cytosine (C). The bases are nitrogenous because their chemical activity is determined by the electrons of the nitrogen atom, and they are bases because they are one of two great chemical clans—the other being the acids, with which they combine to form salts.

Within each strand of DNA, the nitrogenous bases are bound to a sugar, deoxyribose. Sugar molecules are in turn linked to each other by a phosphate group. When nucleotides (A, G, T, or C) are connected in a sugar-phosphate chain, they form a polynucleotide. In living DNA, two such chains face each other, their bases touching fingers, A matched to T and C to G. The coincidence between bases is known now as Watson-Crick base pairing.

"It has not escaped our notice," Watson and Crick observed, "that the specific pairings we have postulated immediately suggests a possible *copying mechanism* for the genetic material" (emphasis added). Replication proceeds, that is, when a molecule of DNA is unzipped along its internal axis, dividing the hydrogen bonds between the bases. Base pairing then works to prompt both strands of a separated double helix to form a double helix anew.

So Watson and Crick conjectured, and so it has proved.

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The Synthesis of Protein

TOGETHER WITH Francis Crick and Maurice Wilkins, James Watson received the Nobel Prize for medicine in 1962. In his acceptance speech in Stockholm before the king of Sweden, Watson had occasion to explain his original research goals. The first was to account for genetic replication. This, he and Crick had done. The second was to describe the "way in which genes control protein synthesis." This, he was in the course of doing.

DNA is a large, long, and stable molecule. As molecules go, it is relatively inert. It is the proteins, rather, that handle the day-to-day affairs of the cell. Acting as enzymes, and so as agents of change, proteins make possible the rapid metabolism characteristic of modern organisms.

Proteins are formed from the alpha-amino acids, of which there are twenty in living systems. The prefix "alpha" designates the position of the crucial carbon atom in the amino acid, indicating that it lies adjacent to (and is bound up with) a carboxyl group comprising carbon, oxygen, again oxygen, and hydrogen. And the proteins are polymers: like DNA, their amino-acid constituents are formed into molecular chains.

But just how does the cell manage to link amino acids to form specific proteins? This was the problem to which Watson alluded as the king of Sweden, lost in a fog of admiration, nodded amiably.

THE SUCCESS of Watson-Crick base pairing had persuaded a number of molecular biologists that DNA undertook protein synthesis by the same process—the formation of symmetrical patterns or "templates"—that governed its replication. After all, molecular replication proceeded by the divinely simple separation-and-recombination of matching (or symmetrical) molecules, with each strand of DNA serving as the template for another. So it seemed altogether plausible that DNA would likewise serve a template function for the amino acids.

It was Francis Crick who in 1957 first observed that this was most unlikely. In a note circulated privately, Crick wrote that "if one considers the physico-chemical nature of the amino-acid side chains, we do not find complementary features on the nucleic acids. Where are the knobby hydrophobic . . . surfaces to distinguish valine from leucine and isoleucine? Where are the charged groups, in specific positions, to go with acidic and basic amino acids?"

Should anyone have missed his point, Crick made it again: "I don't think that anyone looking at DNA or RNA [ribonucleic acid] would think of them as templates for amino acids."

Had these observations been made by anyone but Francis Crick, they might have been regarded as the work of a lunatic; but in looking at any textbook in molecular biology today, it is clear that Crick was simply noticing what was under his nose. Just where *are* those "knobby hydrophobic surfaces"? To imagine that the nucleic acids form a template or pattern for the amino acids is a little like trying to imagine a glove fitting over a centipede. But if the nucleic acids did not form a template for the amino acids, then the information they contained—all of the ancient wisdom of the species, after all—could only be expressed by an indirect form of transmission: a *code* of some sort.

THE IDEA was hardly new. The physicist Erwin Schrödinger had predicted in 1945 that living systems would contain what he called a "code script"; and his short, elegant book, *What Is Life?*, had exerted a compelling influence on every molecular biologist who read it. Ten years later, the ubiquitous Crick invoked the phrase "sequence hypothesis" to characterize the double idea that DNA sequences spell a message *and* that a code is required to express it. What remained obscure was both the spelling of the message and the mechanism by which it was conveyed.

The mechanism emerged first. During the late 1950's, François Jacob and Jacques Monod advanced the thesis that RNA acts as the first in a chain of intermediates leading from DNA to the amino acids.

Single- rather than double-stranded, RNA is a nucleic acid: a chip from the original DNA block. Instead of thymine (T), it contains the base uracil (U), and the sugar that it employs along its backbone features an atom of oxygen missing from deoxyribose. But RNA, Jacob and Monod argued, was more than a mere molecule: it was a messenger, an instrument of conveyance, "transcribing" in one medium a message first expressed in another. Among the many forms of RNA loitering in the modern cell, the RNA bound for duties of transcription became known, for obvious reasons, as "messenger" RNA.

In transcription, molecular biologists had discovered a second fundamental process, a companion in arms to replication. Almost immediately thereafter, details of the code employed by the messenger appeared. In 1961, Marshall Nirenberg and J. Heinrich Matthaei announced that they had discovered a specific point of contact between RNA and the amino acids. And then, in short

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order, the full genetic code emerged. RNA (like DNA) is organized into triplets, so that adjacent sequences of three bases are mapped to a single amino acid. Sixty-four triplets (or codons) govern twenty amino acids. The scheme is universal, or almost so.

The elaboration of the genetic code made possible a remarkably elegant model of the modern cell as a system in which sequences of codons within the nucleic acids act at a distance to determine sequences of amino acids within the proteins: commands issued, responses undertaken. A third fundamental biological process thus acquired molecular incarnation. If replication served to divide and then to duplicate the cell's ancestral message, and transcription to re-express it in messenger RNA, "translation" acted to convey that message from messenger RNA to the amino acids.

For all the boldness and power of this thesis, the details remained on the level of what bookkeepers call general accounting procedures. No one had established a direct—a *physical*—connection between RNA and the amino acids.

Having noted the problem, Crick also indicated the shape of its solution. "I therefore proposed a theory," he would write retrospectively, "in which there were twenty adaptors (one for each amino acid), together with twenty special enzymes. Each enzyme would join one particular amino acid to its own special adaptor."

In early 1969, at roughly the same time that a somber Lyndon Johnson was departing the White House to return to the Pedernales, the adaptors whose existence Crick had predicted came into view. There were twenty, just as he had suggested. They were short in length; they were specific in their action; and they were nucleic acids. Collectively, they are now designated "transfer" RNA (tRNA).

Folded like a cloverleaf, transfer RNA serves physically as a bridge between messenger RNA and an amino acid. One arm of the cloverleaf is called the anti-coding region. The three nucleotide bases that it contains are curved around the arm's bulb-end; they are matched by Watson-Crick base pairing to bases on the messenger RNA. The other end of the cloverleaf is an acceptor region. It is here that an amino acid must go, with the structure of tRNA suggesting a complicated female socket waiting to be charged by an appropriate male amino acid.

The adaptors whose existence Crick had predicted served dramatically to confirm his hypothesis that such adaptors were needed. But although they brought about a physical connection between the nucleic and the amino acids, the fact that they were themselves nucleic acids raised a question: in the unfolding molecular chain, just what acted to adapt the adaptors to the amino acids? And this, too, was a problem Crick both envisaged and solved: his original suggestion mentioned both adaptors (nucleic acids) and their *enzymes* (proteins).

And so again it proved. The act of matching adaptors to amino acids is carried out by a family of enzymes, and thus by a family of proteins: the aminoacyl-tRNA synthetases. There are as many such enzymes as there are adaptors. The prefix "aminoacyl" indicates a class of chemical reactions, and it is in aminoacylation that the cargo of a carboxyl group is bonded to a molecule of transfer RNA.

Collectively, the enzymes known as synthetases have the power both to recognize specific codons and to select their appropriate amino acid under the universal genetic code. Recognition and selection are ordinarily thought to be cognitive acts. In psychology, they are poorly understood, but within the cell they have been accounted for in chemical terms and so in terms of "the model for what science should be."

With tRNA appropriately charged, the molecule is conveyed to the ribosome, where the task of assembling sequences of amino acids is then undertaken by still another nucleic acid, ribosomal RNA (rRNA). By these means, the modern cell is at last subordinated to a rich narrative drama. To repeat:

Replication duplicates the genetic message in DNA.

Transcription copies the genetic message from DNA to RNA.

Translation conveys the genetic message from RNA to the amino acids—whereupon, in a fourth and final step, the amino acids are assembled into proteins.

The Central Dogma

It was once again Francis Crick, with his remarkable gift for impressing his authority over an entire discipline, who elaborated these facts into what he called the central dogma of molecular biology. The cell, Crick affirmed, is a divided kingdom. Acting as the cell's administrators, the nucleic acids embody all of the requisite wisdom—where to go, what to do, how to manage—in the specific sequence of their nucleotide bases. Administration then proceeds by the transmission of information *from* the nucleic acids *to* the proteins.

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The central dogma thus depicts an arrow moving one way, from the nucleic acids to the proteins, and never the other way around. But is anything ever routinely returned, arrow-like, from its target? This is not a question that Crick considered, although in one sense the answer is plainly no. Given the modern genetic code, which maps four nucleotides onto twenty amino acids, there can be no inverse code going in the opposite direction; an inverse mapping is mathematically impossible.

But there is another sense in which Crick's central dogma does engender its own reversal. If the nucleic acids are the cell's administrators, the proteins are its chemical executives: both the staff and the stuff of life. The molecular arrow goes one way with respect to information, but it goes the other way with respect to chemistry.

Replication, transcription, and translation represent the grand unfolding of the central dogma as it proceeds in one direction. The chemical activities initiated by the enzymes represent the grand unfolding of the central dogma as it goes in the other. Within the cell, the two halves of the central dogma combine to reveal a *system of coded chemistry*, an exquisitely intricate but remarkably coherent temporal tableau suggesting a great army in action.

From these considerations a familiar figure now emerges: the figure of a chicken and its egg. Replication, transcription, and translation are all under the control of various enzymes. But enzymes are proteins, and these particular proteins are specified by the cell's nucleic acids. DNA requires the enzymes in order to undertake the work of replication, transcription, and translation; the enzymes require DNA in order to initiate it. The nucleic acids and the proteins are thus profoundly coordinated, each depending upon the other. Without aminoacyl-tRNA synthetase, there is no translation from RNA; but without DNA, there is no synthesis of aminoacyl-tRNA synthetase.

If the nucleic acids and their enzymes simply chased each other forever around the same cell, the result would be a vicious circle. But life has elegantly resolved the circle in the form of a spiral. The aminoacyl-tRNA synthetase that is required to complete molecular translation enters a given cell from its progenitor or "maternal" cell, where it is specified by that cell's DNA. The enzymes required to make the maternal cell's DNA do its work enter that cell from *its* maternal line. And so forth.

On the level of intuition and experience, these facts suggest nothing more mysterious than the longstanding truism that life comes only from life. *Omnia viva ex vivo*, as Latin writers said. It is only when they are embedded in various theories about the *origins* of life that the facts engender a paradox, or at least a question: in the receding molecular spiral, which came first—the chicken in the form of DNA, or its egg in the form of various proteins? And if neither came first, how could life have begun?

The RNA World

IT IS 1967, the year of the Six-Day war in the Middle East, the discovery of the electroweak forces in particle physics, and the completion of a twenty-year research program devoted to the effects of fluoridation on dental caries in Evanston, Illinois. It is also the year in which Carl Woese, Leslie Orgel, and Francis Crick introduced the hypothesis that "evolution based on RNA replication *preceded* the appearance of protein synthesis" (emphasis added).

By this time, it had become abundantly clear that the structure of the modern cell was not only more complex than other physical structures but complex in poorly understood ways. And yet no matter how far back biologists traveled into the tunnel of time, certain features of the modern cell were still there, a message sent into the future by the last universal common ancestor. Summarizing his own perplexity in retrospect, Crick would later observe that "an honest man, armed with all the knowledge available to us now, could only state that, in some sense, the origin of life appears at the moment to be almost a miracle." Very wisely, Crick would thereupon determine never to write another paper on the subject—although he did affirm his commitment to the theory of "directed panspermia," according to which life originated in some other portion of the universe and, for reasons that Crick could never specify, was simply sent here.

But that was later. In 1967, the argument presented by Woesel, Orgel, and Crick was simple. Given those chickens and their eggs, *something* must have come first. Two possibilities were struck off by a process of elimination. DNA? Too stable and, in some odd sense, too perfect. The proteins? Incapable of dividing themselves, and so, like molecular eunuchs, useful without being fecund. That left RNA. While it was not obviously the right choice for a primordial molecule, it was not obviously the wrong choice, either.

The hypothesis having been advanced—if with no very great sense of intellectual confidence—biologists differed in its interpretation. But they did concur on three general principles. First: that at some time in the distant past, RNA rather than DNA controlled genetic replication. Second: that

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Watson-Crick base pairing governed ancestral RNA. And third: that RNA once carried on chemical activities of the sort that are now entrusted to the proteins. The paradox of the chicken and the egg was thus resolved by the hypothesis that the chicken *was* the egg.

The independent discovery in 1981 of the ribozyme—a ribonucleic enzyme—by Thomas Cech and Sidney Altman endowed the RNA hypothesis with the force of a scientific conjecture. Studying the ciliated protozoan *Tetrahymena thermophila*, Cech discovered to his astonishment a form of RNA capable of inducing cleavage. Where an enzyme might have been busy pulling a strand of RNA apart, there was a ribozyme doing the work instead. That busy little molecule served not only to give instructions: apparently it took them as well, and in any case it did what biochemists had since the 1920's assumed could only be done by an enzyme and hence by a protein.

In 1986, the biochemist Walter Gilbert was moved to assert the existence of an entire RNA "world," an ancestral state promoted by the magic of this designation to what a great many biologists would affirm as fact. Thus, when the molecular biologist Harry Noller discovered that protein synthesis within the contemporary ribosome is catalyzed by ribosomal RNA (rRNA), and not by any of the familiar, old-fashioned enzymes, it appeared "almost certain" to Leslie Orgel that "there once *was* an RNA world" (emphasis added).

From Molecular Biology to the Origins of Life

It is perfectly true that every part of the modern cell carries some faint traces of the past. But these molecular traces are only hints. By contrast, to everyone who has studied it, the ribozyme has appeared to be an authentic relic, a solid and palpable souvenir from the pre-biotic past. Its discovery prompted even Francis Crick to the admission that he, too, wished he had been clever enough to look for such relics before they became known.

Thanks to the ribozyme, a great many scientists have become convinced that the "model for what science should be" is achingly close to encompassing the origins of life itself. "My expectation," remarks David Liu, professor of chemistry and chemical biology at Harvard, "is that we will be able to reduce this to a very simple series of logical events." Although often overstated, this optimism is by no means irrational. Looking at the modern cell, biologists propose to reconstruct in time the structures that are now plainly there in space.

Research into the origins of life has thus been subordinated to a rational three-part sequence, beginning in the very distant past. First, the constituents of the cell were formed and assembled. These included the nucleotide bases, the amino acids, and the sugars. There followed next the emergence of the ribozyme, endowed somehow with powers of self-replication. With the stage set, a system of coded chemistry then emerged, making possible what the molecular biologist Paul Schimmel has called "the theater of the proteins." Thus did matters proceed from the pre-biotic past to the very threshold of the last universal common ancestor, whereupon, with inimitable gusto, life began to diversify itself by means of Darwinian principles.

This account is no longer fantasy. But it is not yet fact. That is one reason why retracing its steps is such an interesting exercise, to which we now turn.

Miller Time

It is perhaps four billion years ago. The first of the great eras in the formation of life has commenced. The laws of chemistry are completely in control of things—what else is there? It is Miller Time, the period marking the transition from inorganic to organic chemistry.

According to the impression generally conveyed in both the popular and the scientific literature, the success of the original Miller-Urey experiment was both absolute and unqualified. This, however, is something of an exaggeration. Shortly after Miller and Urey published their results, a number of experienced geochemists expressed reservations. Miller and Urey had assumed that the pre-biotic atmosphere was one in which hydrogen atoms gave up (reduced) their electrons in order to promote chemical activity. Not so, the geochemists contended. The pre-biotic atmosphere was far more nearly neutral than reductive, with little or no methane and a good deal of carbon dioxide.

Nothing in the intervening years has suggested that these sour geochemists were far wrong. Writing in the 1999 issue of *Peptides*, B.M. Rode observed blandly that "modern geochemistry assumes that the secondary atmosphere of the primitive earth (i.e., after diffusion of hydrogen and helium into space) . . . consisted mainly of carbon dioxide, nitrogen, water, sulfur dioxide, and even small amounts of oxygen." This is not an environment calculated to induce excitement.

Until recently, the chemically unforthcoming nature of the early atmosphere remained an embarrassing secret among evolutionary biologists, like an uncle known privately to dress in women's underwear; if biologists were disposed in public to

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acknowledge the facts, they did so by remarking that every family has one. This has now changed. The issue has come to seem troubling. A recent paper in *Science* has suggested that previous conjectures about the pre-biotic atmosphere were seriously in error. A few researchers have argued that a reducing atmosphere is not, after all, quite so important to pre-biotic synthesis as previously imagined.

In all this, Miller himself has maintained a far more unyielding and honest perspective. "Either you have a reducing atmosphere," he has written bluntly, "or you're not going to have the organic compounds required for life."

IF THE composition of the pre-biotic atmosphere remains a matter of controversy, this can hardly be considered surprising: geochemists are attempting to revisit an era that lies four billion years in the past. The synthesis of pre-biotic chemicals is another matter. Questions about them come under the discipline of laboratory experiments.

Among the questions is one concerning the nitrogenous base cytosine (C). Not a trace of the stuff has been found in any meteor. Nothing in comets, either, so far as anyone can tell. It is not buried in the Antarctic. Nor can it be produced by any of the common experiments in pre-biotic chemistry. Beyond the living cell, it has not been found at all.

When, therefore, M.P. Robertson and Stanley Miller announced in *Nature* in 1995 that they had specified a plausible route for the pre-biotic synthesis of cytosine from cyanoacetaldehyde and urea, the feeling of gratification was very considerable. But it has also been short-lived. In a lengthy and influential review published in the 1999 *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, the New York University chemist Robert Shapiro observed that the reaction on which Robertson and Miller had pinned their hopes, although active enough, ultimately went nowhere. All too quickly, the cytosine that they had synthesized transformed itself into the RNA base uracil (U) by a chemical reaction known as deamination, which is nothing more mysterious than the process of getting rid of one molecule by sending it somewhere else.

The difficulty, as Shapiro wrote, was that "the formation of cytosine and the subsequent deamination of the product to uracil occur[ed] at about the same rate." Robertson and Miller had themselves reported that after 120 hours, half of their precious cytosine was gone—and it went faster when their reactions took place in saturated urea. In Shapiro's words, "It is clear that the yield of cytosine would fall to 0 percent if the reaction were extended."

If the central chemical reaction favored by Robertson and Miller was self-defeating, it was also contingent on circumstances that were unlikely. *Concentrated* urea was needed to prompt their reaction; an outhouse whiff would not do. For this same reason, however, the pre-biotic sea, where concentrates disappear too quickly, was hardly the place to begin—as anyone who has safely relieved himself in a swimming pool might confirm with guilty satisfaction. Aware of this, Robertson and Miller posited a different set of circumstances: in place of the pre-biotic soup, drying lagoons. In a fine polemical passage, their critic Shapiro stipulated what would thereby be required:

> An isolated lagoon or other body of seawater would have to undergo extreme concentration. . . .
>
> It would further be necessary that the residual liquid be held in an impermeable vessel [in order to prevent cross-reactions].
>
> The concentration process would have to be interrupted for some decades . . . to allow the reaction to occur.
>
> At this point, the reaction would require quenching (perhaps by evaporation to dryness) to prevent loss by deamination.
>
> At the end, one would have a batch of urea in solid form, containing some cytosine (and urea).

Such a scenario, Shapiro remarked, "cannot be excluded as a rare event on early earth, but it cannot be termed plausible."

LIKE CYTOSINE, sugar must also make an appearance in Miller Time, and, like cytosine, it too is difficult to synthesize under plausible pre-biotic conditions.

In 1861, the German chemist Alexander Bulterow created a sugar-like substance from a mixture of formaldehyde and lime. Subsequently refined by a long line of organic chemists, Bulterow's so-called formose reaction has been an inspiration to origins-of-life researchers ever since.

The reaction is today initiated by an alkalizing agent, such as thallium or lead hydroxide. There follows a long induction period, with a number of intermediates bubbling up. The formose reaction is auto-catalytic in the sense that it keeps on going: the carbohydrates that it generates serve to prime the reaction in an exponentially growing feedback loop until the initial stock of formaldehyde is exhausted. With the induction over, the formose reaction yields a number of complex sugars.

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Nonetheless, it is not sugars in general that are wanted from Miller Time but a particular form of sugar, namely, ribose—and not simply ribose but dextro ribose. Compounds of carbon are naturally right-handed or left-handed, depending on how they polarize light. The ribose in living systems is right-handed, hence the prefix "dextro." But the sugars exiting the formose reaction are racemic, that is, both left- and right-handed, and the yield of usable ribose is negligible.

While nothing has as yet changed the fundamental fact that it is very hard to get the right kind of sugar from any sort of experiment, in 1990 the Swiss chemist Albert Eschenmoser was able to change substantially the way in which the sugars appeared. Reaching with the hand of a master into the formose reaction itself, Eschenmoser altered two molecules by adding a phosphate group to them. This slight change prevented the formation of the alien sugars that cluttered the classical formose reaction. The products, Eschenmoser reported, included among other things a mixture of ribose-2,4,-diphosphate. Although the mixture was racemic, it did contain a molecule close to the ribose needed by living systems. With a few chemical adjustments, Eschenmoser could plausibly claim, the pre-biotic route to the synthesis of sugar would lie open.

It remained for skeptics to observe that Eschenmoser's ribose reactions were critically contingent on Eschenmoser himself, and at two points: the first when he attached phosphate groups to a number of intermediates in the formose reaction, and the second when he removed them.

What had given the original Miller-Urey experiment its power to excite the imagination was the sense that, having set the stage, Miller and Urey exited the theater. By contrast, Eschenmoser remained at center stage, giving directions and in general proving himself indispensable to the whole scene.

Events occurring in Miller Time would thus appear to depend on the large assumption, still unproved, that the early atmosphere was reductive, while two of the era's chemical triumphs, cytosine and sugar, remain for the moment beyond the powers of contemporary pre-biotic chemistry.

From Miller Time to Self-Replicating RNA

In the grand progression by which life arose from inorganic matter, Miller Time has been concluded. It is now 3.8 billion years ago. The chemical precursors to life have been formed. A limpid pool of nucleotides is somewhere in existence. A new era is about to commence.

The historical task assigned to this era is a double one: forming chains of nucleic acids from nucleotides, and discovering among them those capable of reproducing themselves. Without the first, there is no RNA; and without the second, there is no life.

In living systems, polymerization or chain-formation proceeds by means of the cell's invaluable enzymes. But in the grim inhospitable pre-biotic, no enzymes were available. And so chemists have assigned their task to various inorganic catalysts. J.P. Ferris and G. Ertem, for instance, have reported that activated nucleotides bond covalently when embedded on the surface of montmorillonite, a kind of clay. This example, combining technical complexity with general inconclusiveness, may stand for many others.

In any event, polymerization having been concluded—by whatever means—the result was (in the words of Gerald Joyce and Leslie Orgel) "a random ensemble of polynucleotide sequences": long molecules emerging from short ones, like fronds on the surface of a pond. Among these fronds, nature is said to have discovered a self-replicating molecule. But how?

Darwinian evolution is plainly unavailing in this exercise or that era, since Darwinian evolution *begins* with self-replication, and self-replication is precisely what needs to be explained. But if Darwinian evolution is unavailing, so, too, is chemistry. The fronds comprise "a *random* ensemble of polynucleotide sequences" (emphasis added); but no principle of organic chemistry suggests that aimless encounters among nucleic acids must lead to a chain capable of self-replication.

If chemistry is unavailing and Darwin indisposed, what is left as a mechanism? The evolutionary biologist's finest friend: sheer dumb luck.

Was nature lucky? It depends on the payoff and the odds. The payoff is clear: an ancestral form of RNA capable of replication. Without that payoff, there is no life, and obviously, at some point, the payoff paid off. The question is the odds.

For the moment, no one knows how precisely to compute those odds, if only because within the laboratory, no one has conducted an experiment leading to a self-replicating ribozyme. But the minimum length or "sequence" that is needed for a contemporary ribozyme to undertake what the distinguished geochemist Gustaf Arrhenius calls "demonstrated ligase activity" *is* known. It is roughly 100 nucleotides.

Whereupon, just as one might expect, things blow up very quickly. As Arrhenius notes, there are

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4^{100} or roughly 10^{60} nucleotide sequences that are 100 nucleotides in length. This is an unfathomably large number. It exceeds the number of atoms contained in the universe, as well as the age of the universe in seconds. If the odds in favor of self-replication are 1 in 10^{60}, no betting man would take them, no matter how attractive the payoff, and neither presumably would nature.

"Solace from the tyranny of nucleotide combinatorials," Arrhenius remarks in discussing this very point, "is sought in the feeling that strict sequence specificity may not be required through all the domains of a functional oligmer, thus making a large number of library items eligible for participation in the construction of the ultimate functional entity." Allow me to translate: why assume that self-replicating sequences are apt to be rare just because they are long? They might have been quite common.

They might well have been. And yet all experience is against it. Why should self-replicating RNA molecules have been common 3.6 billion years ago when they are impossible to discern under laboratory conditions today? No one, for that matter, has ever seen a ribozyme capable of *any* form of catalytic action that is not very specific in its sequence and thus unlike even closely related sequences. No one has ever seen a ribozyme able to undertake chemical action without a suite of enzymes in attendance. No one has ever seen anything like it.

The odds, then, are daunting; and when considered realistically, they are even worse than this already alarming account might suggest. The discovery of a single molecule with the power to initiate replication would hardly be sufficient to establish replication. What template would it replicate *against*? We need, in other words, at least two, causing the odds of their joint discovery to increase from 1 in 10^{60} to 1 in 10^{120}. Those two sequences would have been needed in roughly the same place. And at the same time. And organized in such a way as to favor base pairing. And somehow held in place. And buffered against competing reactions. And productive enough so that their duplicates would not at once vanish in the soundless sea.

In contemplating the discovery by chance of two RNA sequences a mere 40 nucleotides in length, Joyce and Orgel concluded that the requisite "library" would require 10^{48} possible sequences. Given the weight of RNA, they observed gloomily, the relevant sample space would exceed the mass of the earth. And this is the same Leslie Orgel, it will be remembered, who observed that "it was almost certain that there once was an RNA world."

To the accumulating agenda of assumptions, then, let us add two more: that without enzymes, nucleotides were somehow formed into chains, and that by means we cannot duplicate in the laboratory, a pre-biotic molecule discovered how to reproduce itself.

From Self-Replicating RNA to Coded Chemistry

A NEW ERA is now in prospect, one that begins with a self-replicating form of RNA and ends with the system of coded chemistry characteristic of the modern cell. The *modern* cell—meaning one that divides its labors by assigning to the nucleic acids the management of information and to the proteins the execution of chemical activity. It is 3.6 billion years ago.

It is with the advent of this era that distinctively conceptual problems emerge. The gods of chemistry may now be seen receding into the distance. The cell's system of coded chemistry is determined by two discrete combinatorial objects: the nucleic acids and the amino acids. These objects are discrete because, just as there are no fractional sentences containing three-and-a-half words, there are no fractional nucleotide sequences containing three-and-a-half nucleotides, or fractional proteins containing three-and-a-half amino acids. They are combinatorial because both the nucleic acids and the amino acids are combined by the cell into larger structures.

But if information management and its administration within the modern cell are determined by a discrete combinatorial system, the *work* of the cell is part of a markedly different enterprise. The periodic table notwithstanding, chemical reactions are not combinatorial, and they are not discrete. The chemical bond, as Linus Pauling demonstrated in the 1930's, is based squarely on quantum mechanics. And to the extent that chemistry is explained in terms of physics, it is encompassed not only by "the model for what science should be" but by the system of differential equations that play so conspicuous a role in every one of the great theories of mathematical physics.

What serves to coordinate the cell's two big shots of information management and chemical activity, and so to coordinate two fundamentally different structures, is the universal genetic code. To capture the remarkable nature of the facts in play here, it is useful to stress the word *code*.

By itself, a code is familiar enough: an arbitrary mapping or a system of linkages between two discrete combinatorial objects. The Morse code, to take a familiar example, coordinates dashes and dots with letters of the alphabet. To note that codes

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are arbitrary is to note the distinction between a code and a purely physical connection between two objects. To note that codes embody mappings is to embed the concept of a code in mathematical language. To note that codes reflect a linkage of some sort is to return the concept of a code to its human uses.

In every normal circumstance, the linkage comes first and represents a human achievement, something arising from a point beyond the coding system. (The coordination of dot-dot-dot-dash-dash-dash-dot-dot-dot with the distress signal S-O-S is again a familiar example.) Just as no word explains its own meaning, no code establishes its own nature.

The conceptual question now follows. Can the origins of a system of coded chemistry be explained in a way that makes no appeal whatsoever to the kinds of facts that we otherwise invoke to explain codes and languages, systems of communication, the impress of ordinary words on the world of matter?

In this regard, it is worth recalling that, as Hubert Yockey observes in *Information Theory, Evolution, and the Origin of Life* (2005), "there is no trace in physics or chemistry of the control of chemical reactions by a sequence of any sort or of a code between sequences."

Writing in the 2001 issue of the journal *RNA*, the microbiologist Carl Woese referred ominously to the "dark side of molecular biology." DNA replication, Woese wrote, is the extraordinarily elegant expression of the structural properties of a single molecule: zip down, divide, zip up. The transcription into RNA follows suit: copy and conserve. In each of these two cases, structure leads to function. But where is the coordinating link between the chemical structure of DNA and the third step, namely, translation? When it comes to translation, the apparatus is baroque: it is incredibly elaborate, and it does not reflect the structure of any molecule.

These reflections prompted Woese to a somber conclusion: if "the nucleic acids cannot in any way recognize the amino acids," then there is no "fundamental *physical* principle" at work in translation (emphasis added).

But Woese's diagnosis of disorder is far too partial; the symptoms he regards as singular are in fact widespread. What holds for translation holds as well for replication and transcription. The nucleic acids cannot directly recognize the amino acids (and vice versa), but they cannot *directly* replicate or transcribe themselves, either. Both replication and translation are enzymatically driven, and without those enzymes, a molecule of DNA or RNA would do nothing whatsoever. Contrary to what Woese imagines, no fundamental physical principles appear directly at work *anywhere* in the modern cell.

The most difficult and challenging problem associated with the origins of life is now in view. One half of the modern system of coded chemistry—the genetic code and the sequences it conveys—is, from a chemical perspective, arbitrary. The other half of the system of coded chemistry—the activity of the proteins—is, from a chemical perspective, necessary. In life, the two halves are coordinated. The problem follows: how did *that*—the whole system—get here?

The prevailing opinion among molecular biologists is that questions about molecular-biological systems can only be answered by molecular-biological *experiments*. The distinguished molecular biologist Horoaki Suga has recently demonstrated the strengths and the limitations of the experimental method when confronted by difficult conceptual questions like the one I have just posed.

The goal of Suga's experiment was to show that a set of RNA catalysts (or ribozymes) *could* well have played the role now played in the modern cell by the protein family of aminoacyl synthetases. Until his work, Suga reports, there had been no convincing demonstration that a ribozyme was able to perform the double function of a synthetase—that is, recognizing both a form of transfer RNA and an amino acid. But in Suga's laboratory, just such a molecule made a now-celebrated appearance. With an amino acid attached to its tail, the ribozyme managed to cleave itself and, like a snake, affix its amino-acid cargo onto its head. What is more, it could conduct this exercise backward, shifting the amino acid from its head to its tail again. The chemical reactions involved acylation: precisely the reactions undertaken by synthetases in the modern cell.

Horoaki Suga's experiment was both interesting and ingenious, prompting a reaction perhaps best expressed as, "Well, would you look at that!" It has altered the terms of debate by placing a number of new facts on the table. And yet, as so often happens in experimental pre-biotic chemistry, it is by no means clear what interpretation the facts will sustain.

Do Suga's results really establish the existence of a primitive form of coded chemistry? Although unexpected in context, the coordination he achieved between an amino acid and a form of transfer RNA was never at issue in principle. The question is

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whether what was accomplished in establishing a chemical connection between these two molecules was anything like establishing the existence of a *code*. If so, then organic chemistry itself could properly be described as the study of codes, thereby erasing the meaning of a code as an arbitrary mapping between discrete combinatorial objects.

Suga, in summarizing the results of his research, captures rhetorically the inconclusiveness of his achievement. "Our demonstration indicates," he writes, "that catalytic precursor tRNA's *could have provided* the foundation of the genetic coding system." But if the association at issue is not a code, however primitive, it could no more be the "foundation" of a code than a feather could be the foundation of a building. And if it is the foundation of a code, then what has been accomplished has been accomplished by the wrong agent.

In Suga's experiment, there was no sign that the execution of chemical routines fell under the control of a molecular administration, and no sign, either, that the missing molecular administration had anything to do with executive chemical routines. The missing molecular administrator was, in fact, Suga himself, as his own account reveals. The relevant features of the experiment, he writes, "allow[ed] *us* to select active RNA molecules with selectivity toward a *desired* amino acid" (emphasis added). Thereafter, it was Suga and his collaborators who "applied *stringent* conditions" to the experiment, undertook "*selective amplification* of the self-modifying RNA molecules," and "*screened*" vigorously for "self-aminoacylation activity" (emphasis added throughout).

IF NOTHING else, the advent of a system of coded chemistry satisfied the most urgent of imperatives: it was needed and it was found. It was needed because once a system of chemical reactions reaches a certain threshold of complexity, nothing less than a system of coded chemistry can possibly master the ensuing chaos. It was found because, after all, we are here.

Precisely these circumstances have persuaded many molecular biologists that the explanation for the emergence of a system of coded chemistry must in the end lie with Darwin's theory of evolution. As one critic has observed in commenting on Suga's experiments, "If a certain result can be achieved by direction in a laboratory by a Suga, surely it can also be achieved by chance in a vast universe."

A self-replicating ribozyme meets the first condition required for Darwinian evolution to gain purchase. It is by definition capable of replication. And it meets the second condition as well, for, by means of mistakes in replication, it introduces the possibility of variety into the biological world. On the assumption that subsequent changes to the system follow a law of increasing marginal utility, one can then envisage the eventual emergence of a system of coded chemistry—a system that can be explained in terms of "the model for what science should be."

It was no doubt out of considerations like these that, in coming up against what he called the "dark side of molecular biology," Carl Woese was concerned to urge upon the biological community the benefits of "an all-out Darwinian perspective." But the difficulty with "an all-out Darwinian perspective" is that it entails an all-out Darwinian impediment: notably, the assignment of a degree of foresight to a Darwinian process that the process could not possibly possess.

The hypothesis of an RNA world trades brilliantly on the idea that a divided modern system had its roots in some form of molecular symmetry that was then broken by the contingencies of life. At some point in the transition to the modern system, an ancestral form of RNA must have assigned some of its catalytic properties to an emerging family of proteins. This would have taken place at a given historical moment; it is not an artifact of the imagination. Similarly, at some point in the transition to a modern system, an ancestral form of RNA must have acquired the ability to code for the catalytic powers it was discarding. And this, too, must have taken place at a particular historical moment.

The question, of course, is which of the two steps came first. Without life acquiring some degree of foresight, neither step can be plausibly fixed in place by means of any schedule of selective advantages. How could an ancestral form of RNA have acquired the ability to code for various amino acids before coding was useful? But then again, why should "ribozymes in an RNA world," as the molecular biologists Paul Schimmel and Shana O. Kelley ask, "have expedited their own obsolescence?"

Could the two steps have taken place simultaneously? If so, there would appear to be very little difference between a Darwinian explanation and the frank admission that a miracle was at work. If no miracles are at work, we are returned to the place from which we started, with the chicken-and-egg pattern that is visible when life is traced backward now appearing when it is traced forward.

It is thus unsurprising that writings embodying Woese's "all-out Darwinian perspective" are dominated by references to a number of unspecified but mysteriously potent forces and obscure conditional circumstances. I quote without attribution be-

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cause the citations are almost generic (emphasis added throughout):

- The aminoacylation of RNA initially *must* have provided some selective advantage.
- The products of this reaction *must* have conferred some selective advantage.
- However, the development of a crude mechanism for controlling the diversity of possible peptides *would* have been advantageous.
- [P]rogressive refinement of that mechanism *would* have provided *further* selective advantage.

And so forth—ending, one imagines, in reduction to the all-purpose imperative of Darwinian theory, which is simply that what was must have been.

Now It Is Now

At the conclusion of a long essay, it is customary to summarize what has been learned. In the present case, I suspect it would be more prudent to recall how much has been *assumed*:

First, that the pre-biotic atmosphere was chemically reductive; second, that nature found a way to synthesize cytosine; third, that nature also found a way to synthesize ribose; fourth, that nature found the means to assemble nucleotides into polynucleotides; fifth, that nature discovered a self-replicating molecule; and sixth, that having done all that, nature promoted a self-replicating molecule into a full system of coded chemistry.

These assumptions are not only vexing but progressively so, ending in a serious impediment to thought. That, indeed, may be why a number of biologists have lately reported a weakening of their commitment to the RNA world altogether, and a desire to look elsewhere for an explanation of the emergence of life on earth. "It's part of a quiet paradigm revolution going on in biology," the biophysicist Harold Morowitz put it in an interview in *New Scientist*, "in which the radical randomness of Darwinism is being replaced by a much more scientific law-regulated emergence of life."

Morowitz is not a man inclined to wait for the details to accumulate before reorganizing the vista of modern biology. In a series of articles, he has argued for a global vision based on the biochemistry of living systems rather than on their molecular biology or on Darwinian adaptations. His vision treats the living system as more fundamental than its particular species, claiming to represent the "universal and deterministic features of *any* system of chemical interactions based on a water-covered but rocky planet such as ours."

This view of things—metabolism first, as it is often called—is not only intriguing in itself but is enhanced by a firm commitment to chemistry and to "the model for what science should be." It has been argued with great vigor by Morowitz and others. It represents an alternative to the RNA world. It is a work in progress, and it may well be right. Nonetheless, it suffers from one outstanding defect. There is as yet no evidence that it is true.

It is now more than 175 years since Friedrich Wöhler announced the synthesis of urea. It would be the height of folly to doubt that our understanding of life's origins has been immeasurably improved. But whether it has been immeasurably improved in a way that vigorously confirms the daring idea that living systems are chemical in their origin and so physical in their nature—that is another question entirely.

In "On the Origins of the Mind," I tried to show that much can be learned by studying the issue from a computational perspective. Analogously, in contemplating the origins of life, much—in fact, more—can be learned by studying the issue from the perspective of coded chemistry. In both cases, however, what seems to lie beyond the reach of "the model for what science should be" is any success beyond the local. All questions about the *global* origins of these strange and baffling systems seem to demand answers that the model itself cannot by its nature provide.

It goes without saying that this is a tentative judgment, perhaps only a hunch. But let us suppose that questions about the origins of the mind and the origins of life do lie beyond the grasp of "the model for what science should be." In that case, we must either content ourselves with its limitations or revise the model. If a revision also lies beyond our powers, then we may well have to say that the mind and life have appeared in the universe for no very good reason that we can discern.

Worse things have happened. In the end, these are matters that can only be resolved in the way that all such questions are resolved. We must wait and see.

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Spielberg's "Munich"

Gabriel Schoenfeld

THIRTY-THREE years after the event, we now have a film by a great director memorializing the massacre of eleven Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists at the 1972 Olympics in Munich, Germany. But, although much hyped in advance, it has not exactly been a blockbuster at the box office, and it has also engendered considerable controversy.

To *Time* magazine, Steven Spielberg's *Munich* is a "masterpiece." It has "all the virtues we've come to expect when he is working at his highest levels." To *Newsweek*, *Munich* is "a superbly taut and well-made thriller . . . staged with a mastery Hitchcock might envy." Unexpectedly welcome, *Newsweek* adds, "is the tone, the point of view, the morally complex weight Spielberg brings to bear on this story."

But to *Variety*, it is precisely the "morally complex weight" of *Munich* that drags it down: "the story's thrust repeatedly stalls as all sides of an issue are didactically propounded." While the "beautifully made pic will spur newsy media coverage, . . . members of the general public will be glancing at their watches." This last prediction would appear to be borne out in the, by Spielbergian standards, less than stellar ticket sales.

As for the film's general approach, or what might be called its politics, a major point of debate here centers on the "balanced" way in which it is said to depict its Israeli and Palestinian protagonists. In brief, what *Newsweek* and others laud as moral complexity strikes others as something distinctly unsavory. Thus, to David Twersky, director of international affairs at the American Jewish Congress, there is an "odor of moral equivalency [between victims and perpetrators] wafting through this thing." Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of the *New Republic*, voices the same objection in more florid terms: the film, he says, "is soaked in the sweat of its idea of evenhandedness." According to the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, Spielberg's presentation of Israelis and Palestinians as two equally victimized peoples "trapped in a cycle of violence" gives rise to a version of reality in which there are no villains and, "above all, no evil."

But others have risen to the director's defense. To Michelle Goldberg of *Salon*, *Munich* "does not suggest that terrorists and counterterrorists are morally equivalent or that Israel is wrong to defend itself." Rather, it "is about the way vengeance and violence—even necessary, justified violence—corrupt both their victims and their perpetrators. It's about the struggle to maintain some bedrock morality while engaging in immorality." Going beyond Goldberg is Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League, for whom *Munich* shows, "with respect and understanding, . . . the need to respond to terrorism. . . . We do not think this is an attack on Israel [or] a film of moral equivalency."

For his own part, Spielberg has said that he made *Munich* out of a simple desire to commemorate the slaughtered Jews of Munich:

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> [E]very four years there's an Olympics somewhere in the world and there has never been an adequate tribute paid to the Israeli athletes who were murdered in '72, and I wanted to tell this as a tribute to them. . . . I wanted this film to be in memory of them, because they seem to have been forgotten.

On top of this commemorative aim, Spielberg also believes the film is relevant to our own troubled times, and specifically to the current war against terror. As a comment on two adversaries trapped in a "quagmire," and as an implicit "prayer for peace," *Munich* tells us "something important about the tragic standoff we find ourselves in today."

Does it?

Munich OPENS with a chilling, terrifying, ten-minute sequence that expertly re-creates the horror at the 1972 Olympics. We see a team of Palestinian guerrillas commencing their raid in the predawn hours, climbing over the fence into the Olympic village (assisted, unwittingly, by a group of American athletes) and forcing their way into the dormitories where the Israeli team sleeps. The Palestinian terrorists, members of a group called Black September, are merciless and utterly determined; the eleven Israelis are terrified, shaking with fear, some resisting, some escaping, some bearing themselves stoically. Two of them are killed on the spot.

The denouement of this attack takes place not in the dormitory but in Munich's Fürstenfeldbrück airport, where the remaining nine Israeli hostages, having been transported from the Olympic village by helicopter, will die in a fusillade of Palestinian bullets and grenades. But that comes at the end of the film. Sprinkled throughout are further snippets from the terrorist assault, mainly composites of contemporary newsreels with Spielberg's own reproduction of a botched German rescue attempt. These flashbacks are interwoven with the real story of the movie, which is not about Palestinian terrorism or the deaths of the innocent Israelis at all, but rather about Israel's response.

The scene thus shifts from the carnage in Germany to sunlit Tel Aviv. We enter the warm and loving home of the movie's central character, Avner Kauffman (Eric Bana), a strapping, youthful, sensitive agent of the Mossad, happily ensconced with his pregnant and extremely fetching wife. Abruptly, their domestic idyll is interrupted by a military summons from on high. A car is waiting outside. The bewildered Avner is chauffeured to Jerusalem by no less an authority than the chief of the Mossad, there to be ushered unceremoniously into a meeting of ranking generals with the prime minister of Israel herself, Golda Meir (Lynn Cohen).

The dazzled Avner is asked if he is willing to take part in an "important" mission. This assignment, he is told, will mean traveling abroad and not seeing his wife or soon-to-be-born child or anyone else he knows in Israel for an indefinite period of time, which might be years. Beyond the fact that the mission will be dangerous, he is given no further clue as to what it will entail. He is allowed 24 hours to decide.

After an agonizing night, Avner accepts and heads off to Europe. There we meet the four other members of the Mossad team as they discuss their grisly duties. They have been tasked with finding the whereabouts of the eleven planners of the Munich massacre, hunting them down one by one, and killing them. If possible, the operation should be carried out in a highly visible manner—bombs are better than bullets—in order to send a message: Palestinians will pay a stiff price for killing Jews. Avner is the team leader. He is accompanied by Hans (Hanns Zischler), a skilled document forger; Robert (Mathieu Kassovitz), a bombmaker; Carl (Ciaran Hinds), who handles cleanup; and Steve (Daniel Craig), a South African Jew and experienced getaway driver.

At first the team members are a little uneasy about their unaccustomed roles as assassins—but, with Munich fresh in their minds, they are also gung-ho. As the mission proceeds, however, and as missteps and travails mount, they begin to harbor doubts.

Their first victim turns out not to look like a terrorist at all. Shadowing him around Rome, they encounter a good-natured, middle-aged Palestinian (played by Makram Khoury): an intellectual, a translator of *The Arabian Nights* into Italian, courteous, smiling, a generous tipper. So congenial a person is their quarry that when the Mossad agents finally corner him in the hallway of his apartment house and he begs piteously for his life, they are unable to bring themselves to pull the trigger. But at length they do, and his blood runs to the ground, mixing there with the milk that seeps from his grocery bags.

Their second victim is no less urbane, his link to the Munich massacre no less obscure. In carrying out their orders from Jerusalem, the members of the team are afforded another tutorial in the costs, real and potential, of their mission. The target's daughter, an eleven-year-old with a delightful smile, unexpectedly returns home seconds before their bomb is set to go off.

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By the third assassination, which takes place in Cyprus, the pattern is inalterably fixed. Once again the target does not fit the mold of a terrorist or a planner of terrorist acts. Instead, he is an affable middle-aged Palestinian who lives in Sweden, where he teaches Swedish to Lebanese immigrants. And once again there is an instructive mishap. The bomb that kills the Palestinian in his hotel room turns out to be excessively powerful; an Israeli girl, on honeymoon with her Gentile husband, is severely burned and blinded in the neighboring room.

As assassination follows assassination, the troubles besetting the Mossad team only deepen. Obtaining information about their targets requires doing business with a bizarre and wholly untrustworthy family of French anarchists. The team gets into a gun battle and ends up killing a Russian KGB officer, bringing down on Israel the wrath of a superpower. Then one of the members is himself killed following a tryst with a seductress he picks up in a bar. She in turn is killed by the Mossad team in an especially hideous manner, her naked body left sprawled on a chair with blood dripping across her breasts and genitals. A second member of the squad is killed—we do not know by whom, and we never learn. Then Robert, the bombmaker on the team, is blown up in a work accident—but was it really an accident? Once again we never learn.

After months of hunting Palestinians, the mission is mostly accomplished. But in the process the two surviving members of the team have been transformed from hunters to hunted, and the once unflappable Avner has descended into the inner circle of a personal hell. Openly questioning the rectitude of what he has done, he abandons Israel, emigrates together with his wife and child to New York, and begins to suspect that he and his family are being targeted for death by the Mossad. The closing moments of the film show him standing on the Brooklyn waterfront, with the silhouette of the World Trade Center at his back, declining to return to Israel and declaring to his case officer that "there's no peace at the end of this."

ALTHOUGH HE has produced his share of fantasy features, from *E.T.* to *Jurassic Park*, with many others in between, Spielberg is also in command of a certain style of hyperrealism, on display most vividly in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). In re-creating the horrors of the Munich massacre, with machine guns blazing and the blood of innocents splashing onto walls, he is swimming in one of the cinematic currents of which he is an acknowledged master.

Entertainment Weekly has called this film "spectacularly gripping." That is a stretch. Sheer length alone—*Munich* clocks in at two hours and 45 minutes—virtually guarantees longueurs. Although each action scene is as compelling and lifelike and terrifying as the next, interpolated among them is talk and more talk, some of it quite tedious. The Israeli cabinet debates how to respond to Munich; the Mossad assassins debate their actions among themselves; Avner debates his own actions with his case officer, with his mother, with his wife, and, in one highly improbable scene, he even debates the merits of the Middle East conflict with a Palestinian counterpart.

Occasionally these scenes descend into cartoonish banality. Verbal clichés direct from *The Joys of Yiddish*—including many "mazal tovs" and jokes about brisket—are supplemented by, in the words of Anthony Lane of the *New Yorker*, visual clichés "direct from your travel agent: Eiffel Tower for Paris, bicycles for Holland, and feast-laden tables for Israelis, wherever they are."

As for the principal characters, with the partial exception of Avner they are essentially stick figures of whose inner lives we gain not so much as a glimmer. Even the soul of Avner is left unexplored; we observe him wrestling with his demons by means of downcast looks, puzzled glances, and foreboding music, but never become acquainted with the mice that are racing around inside his head. If the historical subject matter on which this film is based is inherently spellbinding, the historical actors we meet are for the most part thoroughly opaque.

HOW DOES *Munich* rate as a treatment of that spellbinding historical subject matter? The Munich massacre, after all, was a real event. In its aftermath, Israel did send a team—teams, actually—of assassins into Europe to track down and kill the planners and perpetrators. Part of that real story was told two decades ago in *Vengeance: The True Story of an Israeli Counter-Terrorism Team*, a page-turner of a book by the Canadian writer George Jonas, which Spielberg draws from liberally and to which he gives full credit. The movie also opens with an evasive caveat: "inspired by real events." But where do the real events end, and where does the inspiration begin?

To the extent that *Munich* relies on Jonas's *Vengeance*, it is already on an incline, if not a slippery slope. An utterly absorbing book, *Vengeance* is also difficult to appraise, being based almost entirely on the much-controverted testimony of a single Mossad agent, Avner. Moreover, although

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Jonas is an undeniably careful researcher, he makes only modest claims for his work, noting that "the difficulty facing the researcher in this field is considerable." When his book first appeared in England in 1984, it was on two best-seller lists simultaneously: non-fiction and fiction alike.

Whatever nits one might pick with *Vengeance*, however, *Munich* does not follow it faithfully, and in some crucial respects does not follow it at all. To take just one central issue: in the book, as in the film, Avner does indeed become disillusioned. But in *Vengeance* his disillusionment stems from how he has been treated by what he calls Israel's "power elite," not from the counterterrorism mission itself.

What Jonas writes on this score is unambiguous. As of 1984, Avner's

> views on his mission are devoid of second thoughts or regrets. He claims not to have ever had any personal feelings of enmity for the men he killed or helped to kill, but continues to regard their physical elimination as something demanded by necessity and honor. He fully supports the decision that sent him and his partners on their mission, and has absolutely no qualms about anything they did. . . .
>
> [H]is overall patriotism as an Israeli remains undiminished. Contemplating every conflict, past or present, he unequivocally takes Israel's side. As between Israel and her enemies, he stands squarely with his own country.

If that by itself is not enough, we now have Avner's own word as well, in the foreword to a 2005 reissue of *Vengeance*:

> [I]f I had to do it all over again, I would make the same choice I made when Golda Meir approached me more than 30 years ago. . . . I make no apologies for the mission my team and I carried out in the 1970's—and, indeed, am proud that I was able to serve my country in this way.

This is hardly the Avner we meet in the movie, a man so wracked by guilt that he rejects Israel and wonders aloud whether he is a murderer of innocents.

But this brings us to the question of Spielberg's purpose in taking such liberties with what we know of the historical record. Is his film guilty of the charge of moral equivalence leveled by its critics?

The evidence for such an accusation is undeniable. Consider a brief sequence near the beginning of the film, in which we are treated to a series of video clips of people mourning over that September day in Munich. As if on home television screens, we see a grief-stricken Israeli family and a grief-stricken Palestinian family; then another grief-stricken Israeli family and another grief-stricken Palestinian family; and so forth. The names of *all* those who perished at Munich, Israeli athletes and Palestinian terrorists alike, are read out in measured and doleful tones.

Commingling the names of the dead in this way can only suggest a shocking reluctance to distinguish murderers from their murdered victims—or perhaps not a reluctance at all but rather a deliberate attempt to suggest that all were equally victims. And this is only one among a number of such facile scenes in *Munich* that betray a similarly false even-handedness.

BUT TO indict Spielberg on this basis is to miss something far more disquieting and repugnant that is going on. *Pace* David Brooks, there is evil aplenty in *Munich*, and Spielberg is hardly reticent or "equivalent" in pointing it out. It is the evil of the Israelis.

Thus, although the Palestinian violence that opens the film is exceptionally brutal, it is by no means the only, let alone the worst, brutality that *Munich* wants us to contemplate. To begin with a relatively small detail that is a foretaste of things to come, there is the suggestively immoral way in which Avner is assigned to a death squad by the governmental machinery of Israel. He is asked to accept this posting without knowing what it is. "You are an Israeli officer; that's your only loyalty," is how his Mossad supervisor will later put it to him. In other words, he is expected to show blind obedience to authority, to follow orders without questioning them—cardinal evils of the 20th century indelibly associated with the war crimes of Nazi officers.

Another foretaste: at a cabinet meeting where Golda Meir makes the case for Israel's assassination campaign, she appears blithely uncomprehending of the adversary and his motivations. "Who are these Palestinians?" she asks in a slow sneer, drawn out for emphasis. Incapable of perceiving the world except through the distorted prism of Jewish suffering, she answers her own question: they are nothing more than Nazis in Arab garb, "the same as Eichmann." This hyperbolic comparison—murderers of eleven "the same" as a murderer of millions?—is left to hang in the air as an example of how Israel is trapped by its past.

Never once in all this does any Israeli present us with a reasoned argument for striking back against terrorists who have hit once and—wandering around Europe virtually unmolested by European

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governments—may be planning to hit again. National security? Self-defense? Deterrence? Justified retribution? None of these considerations is invoked in all the film's talk and debate. On the contrary, what Israel is proposing to undertake is made to seem a *departure* from justice, and especially a departure from traditional Jewish values—even in the eyes of the Israelis themselves. "People say we can't afford to be civilized," says the prime minister. "I've always resisted such people. . . . Today, I am hearing with new ears." In a line perhaps intended as the moral touchstone of the film, she declares wanly, "every civilization finds it necessary to negotiate compromises with its own values."

This discreditable rationale is, furthermore, the *loftiest* offered for what Israel intends to do; others, lower and uglier, are on display as well. Avner's mother, a refugee from Hitler's Europe (and hence also trapped by the past), insists that absolutely anything is permissible in Israel's name: "Whatever it took; whatever it takes." Steve, the South African driver on the team, argues for the mission in terms even cruder in form ("Don't f— with the Jews") or nakedly racist ("The only blood that matters to me is Jewish blood"). And there the whole issue is allowed to rest.

If the assassination campaign is made to sit on an indefensible moral foundation, that is not the only shortcoming we are invited to weigh. At the outset, Avner is firmly told by his case officer that each of the eleven individuals on the Mossad hit list has had a hand in planning the Munich massacre. But that proposition is itself brought under doubt as the film progresses.

Some of this is accomplished through clever casting: as I have already noted, the Palestinians targeted by the Mossad hardly look or behave like your stereotypical terrorists. And some is accomplished through the script, which never offers us any information linking most of the targets to Munich or to terrorism at all. On the contrary, we are repeatedly given to believe that no such link exists.

Told early on, for example, that one of the targets is an organizer of Fatah in France, Carl grows skeptical. "Did they show you evidence of this?" he asks Avner. To which comes the singularly unpersuasive reply that the "story" comes from Mossad headquarters, "and I believed them. . . . It's a crisis, a war, you don't have to always scrutinize. . . . Don't think about it." Blind obedience again.

By the end of the movie, Avner himself demands that his Mossad controller "show me the evidence." But no evidence is ever forthcoming. We are led to conclude that, in a perfect counterpoint to the Arab massacre of innocent Jews at Munich, there has been a systematic killing by Jews of innocent Arabs.

In the meantime, evidence of a very different sort is given a thorough hearing. At various junctures, Palestinians press the case both for their methods and for their larger national goals, and in terms that contrast invidiously with the case that is made, or rather not made, for Israeli nationhood. The Palestinian cause is made to seem reasonable and historically grounded; the establishment of a Jewish state gets scarcely a positive word.

Justifying the resort to terrorism, one Palestinian target of the Mossad team cites repeated Israeli aggressions against Palestinian civilians and rehearses the plight of his people at Israeli hands. "We are," he proclaims, "for 24 years the world's largest refugee population, our homes taken from us, living in camps, no future, no food, nothing decent for our children." At least now, he explains, as a result of the assault on the Israeli Olympic team, "the world will begin hearing us." Shortly after uttering these words, he is permanently silenced, the victim of a Mossad bomb.

Nor is it only their Palestinian adversaries who make the case against Israel. A member of the Israeli hit team helpfully chimes in as well. "You think the Palestinians invented bloodshed?" he asks. "How do you think we got control of the land, by being nice?" To this no one proposes an answer; presumably, there is none.

The difference between the two sides is drawn as well in the *nature* of the violence they employ. Palestinian deeds may be ferocious, but they are also passionately felt, an upwelling of the persecuted weak against the implacably strong. Israeli violence, though no less brutal, is heartless and methodical—not the expression of individuals willingly sacrificing themselves for a just cause but the coldly mechanical and calculated product of the intelligence apparatus of an aggressive state.

Finally, the Mossad's mode of operating displays a number of repellent features that are apparently peculiar to Israel. One of them is sloppiness. Though reputed to be an ultra-efficient intelligence organization, the Mossad of *Munich* is anything but. The character known as Robert, for example, has supposedly been assigned to the hit team on account of his proficiency as a bomb-maker. But it turns out that his real expertise, gained from service in the police, lies in *dismantling* bombs. As a result of this small error, committed somewhere along the chain of command, more

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than a few innocent people in the movie will be maimed or die.

Then there is the Mossad's nearly obsessive concern with money. A continuous running gag is Avner's need to obtain receipts for every expenditure, no matter how trivial. His fellow team members fret over such things as the price per kill; their first target, one of them notes ruefully, "cost us, by my calculations, $352,000." Why this focus on cash? A charitable interpretation is that Spielberg wants us to see it as part and parcel of the Mossad's cavalier attitude toward human life; less charitable interpretations, based on enduring ethnic slurs, suggest themselves as well.

On the day after the Mossad's first kill, the five members of the squad, having rapidly forgotten how difficult it was to pull the trigger on a man begging for his life, gather to mark the occasion in an outdoor café. "Drink some wine, we're celebrating," says one. "I am not celebrating: I am goddamn rejoicing," responds another. Smirking merrily, they rise from their chairs and dance together. Later on, as their education proceeds and they are made to pay a price in the loss of their own men, the celebrating will cease. But a kind of bloodlust, we have been given to understand, is a default feature of the Israeli mentality—a point driven home by the ardent congratulations and handshakes bestowed on a repentant and despondent Avner during his periodic visits home. "I'm proud of what you're doing," says his mother. "You don't know what I am doing," he replies in a voice full of sorrow.

SHORTLY BEFORE *Munich* was released, Steven Spielberg told an interviewer: "I worked very hard so this film was not in any way, shape, or form going to be an attack on Israel." This is a truly curious formulation. Why should he have had to work "very hard" to *avoid* turning a film intended to commemorate the murder of Israeli civilians into a film attacking Israel? And if he did work very hard, why is the film he made still so blatant an attack on Israel in virtually every way, shape, and form?

Part of the answer undoubtedly lies in Spielberg's choice of screenwriter. Tapping the playwright Tony Kushner (together with Eric Roth) to adapt *Vengeance* as a screenplay was a stroke of either conscious calculation or unconscious predilection. Best known for his passionately left-wing *Angels in America*, Kushner has also gained a reputation for his passionately left-wing views on the Arab-Israeli conflict. He has repeatedly called the creation of a Jewish state in the Middle East a "mistake," and is a member of an organization that urges boycotts of Israeli products and disinvestment from corporations that do business in Israel. About the Munich massacre, he is on record as saying that "murdering athletes is a horrible thing"—and then adding that "one of the questions is, why did that happen? What kind of horror produced this horror?"

Spielberg is himself a man of the Left, if of the soft rather than the hard variety. Unlike Kushner, moreover, he is known for his longstanding interest in Jewish memory, evidenced not only in *Schindler's List*, his 1993 film about the Holocaust, but in the project he has financed to amass a vast video archive of Holocaust survivors speaking about their lives. The declared purpose of that project is to use its collection of "testimonies" in order to "overcome prejudice, intolerance, and bigotry—and the suffering they cause."

In filming *Munich*, Spielberg seems to have had a similar purpose in mind—a purpose, it must be said, as treacherous as it is expansive. It certainly caught Spielberg in its coils. Avowedly eager to memorialize Israel's murdered athletes, he apparently found himself anxious not to commit the sin of "prejudice, intolerance, and bigotry" against their murderers, either. "The thing I'm very proud of," Spielberg has said, "is that Tony Kushner and I and the actors did not demonize anyone. We don't demonize our [Palestinian] targets. They're individuals. They have families."

But this is infantile and moronic. All sorts of demonic personages have had families. Joseph Goebbels and his wife Magda had six lovely children, or did have six lovely children, ages three through twelve, all named after their favorite "uncle"—Hela, Hilda, Helmut, Holde, Hedda, and Heide—until, before taking their own lives, the charming Magda poisoned them one by one in the Fuehrer bunker. Now Spielberg, hypocritically preening himself on his liberal tolerance and pushed along by the craftier Kushner, has given the butchers of Munich a break, while foregrounding the "horror"—of Israeli policy—that supposedly "produced" the Munich massacre and other Palestinian atrocities, prior and subsequent. With the World Trade Center hovering in the background of his final scene, he then points this thinly veiled allegory about the evils of counterterrorism in the direction of George W. Bush (in Kushner's words, "a feckless blood-spattered plutocrat") and Ariel Sharon (in Kushner's words, "an unindicted war criminal").

The allegory is itself based upon a radically tendentious reading of history, if not outright lies. In *Munich*, Israel's response to the Olympic massacre

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is made to seem not only futile but the root cause from which an entire wave of Palestinian terrorism will spring. To drive home the point, one of the members of the Mossad team tallies the costs incurred as a result of what has been let loose by their own actions:

> Since we began, the other side has sent letter bombs to eleven embassies, hijacked three planes, killed 130 passengers in Athens and wounded scores more, and killed our military attaché in Washington. . . . Black September's original leadership has been decimated. But new leaders are emerging for whom Black September wasn't violent enough.

This is a phony balance sheet, starting with the letter bombs, 51 of which were sent within ten days of the Munich massacre and well before the Israeli hit squad embarked on its mission, and ending with the deliberate occlusion of the long Arab war against Israel of which Munich was but one spectacular episode in an ongoing chain of anti-Jewish aggression, state-sponsored and otherwise.

ALTHOUGH UNINFORMED viewers of *Munich* would never know it, Palestinian terrorism, abetted by neighboring Arab governments, preceded the formation of Israel itself and inflicted a steady toll of civilian death and injury during its first decades of existence. By the early 1960's, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), an umbrella body headed by Yasir Arafat and based in the West Bank and Jordan, was, with the encouragement of governments across the region, initiating a new kind of terrorist activity, designed not merely to maim and murder Israeli civilians but to capture the undivided attention of the world in the process.

The first of these well-planned operations came in February 1970, when a PLO subgroup succeeded in placing a bomb aboard a Swiss Air flight bound for Tel Aviv and detonating it in mid-air, killing 47. A succession of similar and even more serious incidents followed, with hijackings and shootings and grenade attacks on innocent passengers in airports across Europe and the Middle East. Only five months before Munich, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, another PLO subgroup working in conjunction with the Japanese Red Army, launched an attack on passengers at Israel's international airport, hurling grenades and firing automatic weapons, killing 26 and wounding many more.

Munich marked not an endpoint but a high point of this kind of terror. There was something indescribably poignant about the particular Israelis chosen as targets—wrestlers, fencers, weightlifters, and others, their powerfully built bodies shredded by automatic-weapons rounds or burned to death when the helicopter in which they were entrapped at the Munich airport exploded in flames from a grenade attack. Thanks to the presence of American and European networks at the Olympic Village, the images of horror were broadcast to immense audiences across the entire world, just as the Palestinians intended.

Many were repelled by what they saw. Many were clearly frightened; at the Olympics themselves, as Jonas reports, the flags of all countries were ordered to be flown at half-mast, but, after ten Arab countries protested, the Germans obligingly restored them to the top of their poles. And many more, out of a mixture of motives, conceived a new respect for Palestinian determination and for the Palestinian "cause." Within two years, Yasir Arafat, revolver on hip, would address the General Assembly from its rostrum. Within three, the United Nations General Assembly would solemnly resolve that Zionism, the national-liberation movement of the Jewish people, was a form of racism and racial discrimination.

PORTRAYING HORRENDOUS bloodshed realistically is ultimately what gives *Munich* its force as a movie. It is also what makes its agglomeration of falsehoods so insidious. "Whatever it took, whatever it takes": this is the formula put by Spielberg and Kushner into the mouth of Avner's mother, and it is for allegedly enacting this nihilistic creed that Israel is tarred by them as the initiator of the Middle East's "cycle of violence." But in point of historical fact it was not Israelis but Arab governments and Palestinian terrorists who translated this maxim into a decades-long program of action, wantonly slaughtering innocent women, children, and men in pursuit of their openly professed goal of destroying the Jewish state by "whatever it took, whatever it takes."

Many of them continue to follow the same maxim today—and, in the Palestinian Authority headed first by Arafat and now by his PLO colleague Abu Mazen, systematically educate their children to follow in their path. So do their many counterparts around the world who pursue a similar and even more ambitious war against the "greater Satan" that is America. If in *Munich* we have Steven Spielberg's idea of paying tribute to the eleven murdered Jewish athletes of 1972, one dreads to think of how he would pay tribute to the murdered 3,000 of September 11, 2001. The movie deserves an Oscar in one category only: most pernicious film of the year.

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International Law v. United States

Andrew C. McCarthy

On the American legal landscape, where all roads lead to *Roe* v. *Wade*, the death last summer of Chief Justice William Rehnquist gave rise to a fever of handicapping. Whom would the President nominate for the new vacancy on the Supreme Court, and what would be the impact on our decades-long debate over abortion? Going forward, who would dictate the momentous outcome of this debate: judges, or the people themselves through their elected representatives?

Elsewhere, though, a very different discussion was under way. In Mexico, Amnesty International, the world's most prominent nongovernmental organization (NGO) devoted to human rights, was holding a meeting of its international council. Among the principal items on the agenda was Amnesty's long-held concern that "there is no generally accepted right to abortion in international human-rights law." That being the case, the organization is considering a radical new proposal: the declaration of a fundamental human right to abortion (cast euphemistically as "reproductive freedom"). If the change takes hold, countries denying or interfering with access to abortion would be branded international rogues.

On what authority? The authority of international law, as seen through the prism of Amnesty's own very considerable prestige. But what is international law? It is getting more difficult to say.

The concept of legal norms governing relations between members of different national political communities has a pedigree tracing to antiquity. An international law of sorts, the *jus gentium*, was developed in ancient Rome, to be applied in cases involving those non-Romans to whom the empire did not extend the privileges of citizenship. In the early 17th century, the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius systematized these ancient principles into a framework for governing relations among sovereigns. The Swiss philosopher Emmerich de Vattel, a Grotius disciple and a contemporary of the American founders, made considerable headway on the project with his influential treatise, *The Law of Nations*.

But the framers of the U.S. Constitution were captivated by a somewhat different idea: self-determination, and representative government. Indeed, so fundamental were these to the American experiment that the new nation first tried to make a go of it as a federation of thirteen sovereign states. Freedom, however, could not thrive in such circumstances. Nations, John Jay observed in *The Federalist* No. 4, "will make war whenever they

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have a prospect of getting anything by it," and the nations confronting early America left the country existentially vulnerable. The Articles of Confederation were a failure because they did not trade enough individual liberty for the assurance of collective security, which only a capable central government could provide.

Still, the framers held firm to the imperatives of self-determination and limited interference. The Constitution prescribed a system of enumerated powers, sufficient to secure the nation and promote commerce but respectful of individual choice and local sovereignty. Any authority not expressly assigned to one of the three federal branches was reserved to the states and the people. If new law was needed or if current law required mending, the divisions of authority were reasonably clear: matters of immediate, parochial concern were to be taken up by representatives and courts at the state and local level; the federal government—a sliver of the present-day behemoth—was reserved for those relatively few issues that transcended state boundaries.

If early Americans were suspicious of the aggrandizing potentials of a central government, dictation from abroad was downright unthinkable—indeed, it had been the very catalyst of the Revolution. Not surprisingly, therefore, pains were taken to ensure that the Constitution was supreme and to limit the duties owed by Americans to the rest of the world. Essentially, two sources of authority could impose such duties, and both were subject to narrowing by Congress.

The first was the "law of nations." In a very useful recent book,* Jeremy Rabkin explains that this term of art, culled from Blackstone's *Commentaries*, related specifically to piracy and mercantile shipping (both of which lay outside the jurisdiction of any nation) as well as to the need to provide safe harbor for lawful foreign nationals, including diplomats. And, finite as this was, the framers constrained it still further. Under Article I of the Constitution, the law of nations was to have domestic application only if Congress chose to define and punish offenses against it—and regardless of what other nations might regard as a violation.

The second source of authority governing America's relationship with the rest of the world was treaties. These are the principal font of what is properly thought of as "international law," a concept undeniably more expansive than the law of nations but still rooted in the mutuality of obligations among consenting sovereigns—and, as Rabkin observes, then having little or nothing to do with their internal affairs.

The Constitution empowers the President to enter treaties. Such agreements, however, govern in the U.S. only after the Senate weighs and consents to them by a supermajority of two-thirds. Article VI makes ratified treaties the "supreme law of the land," and in Article III the federal courts are empowered to decide cases arising under them as well as in other international contexts (such as civil suits between Americans and foreign persons or entities). The Eleventh Amendment, ratified in 1795, clarifies that the states, like the federal government, enjoy sovereign immunity from suits by foreign countries and their nationals.

Over time, it has become our government's custom to circumvent the treaty clause, but in a way that is actually more democratic and accountable—namely, by means of regular legislation. The 1994 North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), for example, is not a treaty but an act of Congress, creating by law what is essentially a commercial confederation among the U.S. and its neighbors. Legislation, moreover, frequently works in tandem with treaty-making. To take an instance lately much in the news, the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment (UNCAT), ratified in 1994, obliges signatories to enact domestic anti-torture law, which Congress subsequently did.

Whether we are speaking of the "law of nations" or of treaties, however, the overriding thrust is plain. Irrespective of how they are perceived by foreign countries, or by transnational and subnational entities, duties derived from international legal principles may not be imposed on the United States as a whole, or on Americans individually, except insofar as they comply with domestic law-making procedures. The Constitution is a fortress shielding Americans from the whims and excesses of the so-called international community.

BUT THAT fortress has been under profound attack for some time. Although the challenge is diffuse, its steady growth and its recent intensification are now beginning to erase the premise that law is determined from within by equal citizens rather than imposed from without by remote, unaccountable elites. As this happens, the very character of what it means to be a sovereign nation is undergoing alteration, and not for the better.

The movement toward a "global civil society," as it adherents call it, is led by what the analyst John Fonte describes as "transnational progressives." These are "complementary and interlocking net-

* *The Case for Sovereignty* (AEI, 2004).

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works" of primarily Western elites, including especially nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) like Amnesty International; officials of the UN and other international organizations; lawyers, judges, and professors specializing in international law; multinational corporations; and ideologically compatible officials and bureaucrats operating within nation-states, most definitely including our own.

Of these, easily the most potent—because they are the most energetic and competent—are the NGO's. Their toehold in the international order began with official recognition in the 1948 UN Charter. Though slow to develop, the number of NGO's began mushrooming in the 1980's, to the point where hundreds are now registered with the UN and well over a thousand exist. At the UN's 1992 "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro, no fewer than 1,400 NGO's were in attendance.

Several NGO's stand at the head of the class, with Amnesty International, and especially its American subsidiary, at the very top. Others include Amnesty International's frequent collaborator, the U.S.-based Human Rights Watch, which was founded in 1978 as Helsinki Watch and now boasts global reach; Greenpeace, which married the largely anti-American "peace movement" that engulfed Western Europe at the end of the cold war to new obsessions with environmental and anti-industrial causes; the Center for Constitutional Rights, a U.S.-based "legal and educational organization" founded by the late radical attorneys William Kunstler and Arthur Kinoy, whose once predominantly pro-Communist energies have shifted to a pro-terrorist agenda; and the International Committee of the Red Cross, a Geneva-based organization founded in the 19th century and dedicated to the care of victims and prisoners of war, a role the ICRC once performed with rigorous neutrality but now performs as an interested party in the war on terror.

Stretching the concept of natural law beyond recognition, these groups, and others like them, are dedicated to the proposition that a transcendent body of "international human-rights law" supersedes any contrary provisions enacted by self-determining nations. And in the transnational progressives' scheme of things, determining what the principle of human rights demands in any given circumstance is the province not of any self-governing people but of, well, themselves.

THERE ARE, nonetheless, some overarching themes, expertly identified by Fonte.* Basically, the international-law movement paints a world in which national narratives and national identities will give way to what Shimon Peres, a movement icon, has called an "ultranationalist identity." In this vision, "particularist nationalism" will be supplanted by the idea of a "citizen of the world" living in a "regional community of nations"—a world, in short, very much resembling the self-image of today's European Union.

Given that the capacity to project force is the signal aspect of sovereign power, and thus antithetical to this whole project, it is no accident that the movement sports an instinctive hostility to things military. The spirit is crystallized in the UN Charter itself, whose hortatory opening words condemn indiscriminately the "scourge of war," blaming it (rather than the totalitarian evil *defeated* by war) for the "untold sorrow to mankind" wrought by the two great struggles of the first half of the 20th century. It is also movement dogma that a prerequisite to legitimate military action is UN approval—which theoretically puts free and functional peoples, regardless of their security interests or sovereign procedures, at the whim of the world's more numerous dysfunctional societies. Indeed, progressive transnationalists have taken to condemning even *passive* defense measures, like the security fence by which Israel has drastically reduced Palestinian terrorist attacks.†

That is hardly all. As liberal democracy has become a dominant desideratum in the post-cold-war era, the international-law movement has striven to redefine its essence—to transform self-contained and self-governing bodies of equal citizens into power-sharing arrangements among ethnic groups, including non-citizens. Here, as elsewhere, the consistent target is the United States, which is tirelessly portrayed in the literature of the movement as racist and cruel because it permits the death penalty; defends its interests militarily; draws lines between the rights of citizens and non-citizens; promotes immigrant assimilation rather than multiculturalism; eschews "hate speech" legislation; resists (at least, on occasion) affirmative action; abjures statist economic policies; incarcerates criminals without regard to whether the ethnic composition of the resulting prison population is reflective of the population at large; and so on.

In line with this animus, the NGO's issue reports

* "Liberal Democracy vs. Transnational Progressivism: The Future of the Ideological Civil War Within the West," *Orbis*, Summer 2002.

† See my "The End of the Right of Self-Defense?—Israel, the World Court, and the War on Terror," COMMENTARY, November 2004.

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depicting the U.S. as a consistent human-rights violator. Human Rights Watch has led others in urging African nations to demand reparations for slavery from the U.S. (but not, tellingly, from African and Islamic countries). Both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International tout the Soviet-inspired "right" to an "adequate standard of living" as set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At the 2001 UN Conference Against Racism in Durban, both organizations joined other prominent NGO's (including the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Council of Churches, the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Arab-American Institute, and the NAACP) in demanding that the UN Human Rights Commission take action against the U.S. to address its endemic racism and other supposed human-rights violations.

In the effort against radical Islam and Saddam Hussein's regime, the NGO's have denigrated the notion that we are at *war*, instead defining 9/11 as a serious crime to be addressed not on the battlefield but in the courts—including, of course, international courts. They have targeted American war-fighting operations as human-rights violations. The ICRC broke its traditions of neutrality and confidentiality to accuse the United States publicly of conduct "tantamount to torture" with respect to war-on-terror detainees. And in the midst of active hostilities, the Center for Constitutional Rights—as noted, an *American* NGO—went to Germany to file a complaint against Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, former CIA Director George Tenet, and several other top military and civilian officials for purported crimes against humanity and human-rights violations committed at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

AS MENACING as all of this is, it would not constitute a threat to democratic self-determination were it not for the fact that it is built on the ostensible edifice of entrenched legal principles. Two of them, fittingly, are the law of nations and the law of treaties.

Although recognized by Chief Justice John Marshall in 1815 as a core part of American law, the law of nations was, at the time, of little consequence as a means of imposing extra-national ideas. That is because the first Congress, rather than opening the floodgates to policy-making forays on the part of the judiciary, passed laws criminalizing the very acts that Blackstone had identified as universally condemnable: robbery and murder on the high seas, and assaults against foreign ambassadors. To support these narrow sanctions, Congress added the Alien Tort Statute (ATS), giving federal courts the jurisdiction to entertain civil suits brought by aliens pursuant to claimed violations of the law of nations and treaties alike.

Although ATS was a product of a (happily) bygone era when federal courts were at liberty to invent new protections under the guise of "discovering" a common law, it lay all but dormant for nearly two centuries after its 1789 enactment. Then, in 1980, the Second Circuit federal-appeals court, in a case with no connection to the United States, resorted to the Alien Tort Statute in granting money damages to the estates of Paraguayan torture victims murdered in Paraguay by a Paraguayan official. The three-judge panel reached this breathtaking result by concluding that the law of nations had somehow been expanded to embrace prohibitions on torture—although neither the U.S. nor Paraguay had ratified any torture treaties at the time.

That was not the worst of it. After all, torture—as our recent national debate illustrates—is broadly reviled and relatively rare. If the courts had only revived a moribund concept for the purpose of imposing international sentiments on something so aberrant and universally condemned, that would be bad practice—usurping a task of legislators—but not a bad result. The appeals court, however, did not leave matters at that. Going well beyond the law of nations, one concurring judge said that, in the future, the Alien Tort Statute could be applied by American courts to extra-national conduct, no matter how remote from American national interests—if, in the view of the federal judges, such conduct transgressed "definable, universal, and obligatory norms."

As surely as night follows day, courts have leaped on this subjective test of their own creation to do subjective "justice." In 1995, for example, the Second Circuit forged a civil action for damages under the ATS for victims of genocide—even though, by then, the political branches had implemented an international convention against genocide with legislation expressly stating that no ground for private, civil action was being created. In the meantime, the Ninth Circuit in California discovered a "clear and universally recognized norm prohibiting arbitrary arrest and detention." Although the U.S. Supreme Court reversed this decision in a 2004 case, *Sosa* v. *Alvarez-Machain*, it simultaneously endorsed the amorphous "definable, universal, and obligatory" test that had caused the erroneous ruling in the first place.

This was a giant step in a highly dangerous di-

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rection. As Justice Scalia cautioned in his separate opinion:

> The notion that a law of nations, redefined to mean the consensus of states on *any* subject, can be used by a private citizen to control a sovereign's treatment of *its own citizens* within *its own territory* is a 20th-century invention of internationalist law professors and human-rights advocates. . . . The framers would, I am confident, be appalled by the proposition that, for example, the American peoples' democratic adoption of the death penalty . . . could be judicially nullified because of the disapproving views of foreigners. [Emphasis in the original.]

But that, and more, is exactly what the international-law movement is banking on.

JUST AS it has with the law of nations, the movement is making progress with treaties.

From the perspective of sovereign choice, treaties are the most legitimate form of international law because they are positive agreements rather than derivations from airy general principles. This is the case whether they are formal treaties (requiring ratification by two-thirds of the Senate), congressional-executive agreements (calling for passage in the manner of ordinary legislation), or solely executive agreements (the most controversial since they are based on the President's powers as commander-in-chief with no input from Congress).

When treaties involve two or just a few parties, their meaning is generally certain enough, and the United States regularly stipulates that treaties to which it is a party have binding effect only to the extent consistent with the Constitution. The Supreme Court, furthermore, has held since the 19th century that a "treaty is primarily a compact between independent nations," and "depends for the enforcement of its provisions on the interest and honor of the governments which are parties to it." Any allegation that treaty rights have been denied is consequently the business of diplomatic negotiations between sovereigns, not lawsuits brought by affected individuals.

Hence, one might assume that treaties pose little harm to our constitutional order and the security it safeguards. As usual, though, the matter is more complicated. Significant treaties now tend to be extensive, multilateral affairs, involving scores of nations. That would be all right if everyone were agreeing at the same time to the same words. But everyone is not.

First, American Presidents have signed treaties in a spirit of good relations or political correctness with no real expectation that they would ever be ratified (or even, as in President Clinton's handling of the Kyoto global-warming accord, submitted for ratification). But according to a treaty on treaties that the U.S. *has* ratified, mere signing is a solemn act—obligating a nation to refrain from anything that might defeat the treaty's aims until it makes a decision on ratification, which can often take years. Thus, a presidential signature alone, coupled with the lack of formal rejection, increases the cachet of the agreement for purposes of "customary international law" (on which see below). Indeed, signing but not ratifying a bad treaty can be much worse than ratifying a bad treaty with caveats, since caveats at least register objection to offensive provisions.

Second, caveats themselves create problems. With multiple countries lodging multiple reservations, it becomes very difficult to discern exactly what everyone agreed to. Furthermore, the fanfare that made the treaty politically expedient for a President to sign can make reservations to it unpopular. In addition, international-law commentators (and some treaties themselves) hold that caveats are invalid if they are deemed inconsistent with the main objectives of the treaty. The result is that the international-law movement and its advocates—who have generally written the treaties in the first place—are in a very advantageous position when they argue that the treaties are binding as originally written.

THESE PROBLEMS are exacerbated geometrically by the now-evolved doctrine of customary international law. In 1900, the Supreme Court described this concept in a case called *The Paquete Habana*:

> [W]here there is no treaty, and no controlling executive or legislative act or judicial decision, resort must be had to the customs and usages of civilized nations; and, as evidence of these, to the works of jurists and commentators, who by years of labor, research, and experience, have made themselves peculiarly well acquainted with the subjects of which they treat. Such works are resorted to by judicial tribunals, not for the speculations of their authors concerning what the law ought to be, but for trustworthy evidence of what the law really is.

The world, of course, has drastically changed since *The Paquete Habana*. In particular, there has

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been an explosion of multilateral treaty-writing that has contributed to ever greater uncertainty in the law. Indeed, already in 1899 the Hague Convention II had in its preamble a clause (the so-called "Martens Clause") proclaiming that, on top of everything laid out in the convention itself, "populations and belligerents remain under the protection and empire of the principles of international law, as they result from the usages established between civilized nations, from the laws of humanity, and the requirements of the public conscience." This vaporous clause (or variations of it) has been reiterated in numerous treaties, including the 1949 Geneva Conventions.

The same conception was reaffirmed by the Supreme Court just two years ago in *Sosa* and has been buttressed by an abundance of executive acts (including treaties signed and not ratified), legislative acts (treaties and other forms of international agreement implemented by Congress), and judicial decisions claiming an authority to impose alleged universal norms. Nor are today's "jurists and commentators" of the stature of Grotius, Vattel, and Blackstone. They are NGO's, activist law professors, international courts, UN bureaucrats, the European Commission, and judges everywhere on earth to whom a majority of the Supreme Court has seen fit to look for guidance even in interpreting the American Constitution.

The way the game works is this. There is a written law and an unspoken, customary law. But if the written law is accepted widely over a period of years, it, too, is said to be subsumed in the customary law—meaning that countries that refuse to sign treaties, or that sign but later opt out, or whose signature was conditioned on serious reservations, may find themselves facing international condemnation for failing to comply with that to which they never consented to begin with, on the theory that the unqualified treaty language has somehow transmogrified into binding customary status.

As for what binding customary law *means*, that, at any moment in time, is informed by more than these broad agreements. Taken into account are, among other things: (a) the diplomatic, political, and military behavior of states (including their official statements, court decisions, legislation, and administrative decrees); (b) the decisions of international tribunals like the United Nations International Court of Justice (ICJ), the International Criminal Court (ICC), and such ad-hoc tribunals as those established at Nuremburg and Tokyo after World War II and after the genocides in Rwanda and Yugoslavia in the mid-1990's; (c) writings by international-law experts interpreting treaties and customs; (d) military manuals; (e) the proceedings of the United Nations and its various components; and (f) interpretive publications and conventions produced by influential NGO's.*

WITH SUCH inputs in the machinery, the outputs are all but predictable. For example, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has asserted without qualification that the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003 was a violation of international law (notwithstanding over a dozen Security Council resolutions on Iraq). Given the widespread global opposition to the war, this assessment has seeped into the customary calculus and helped turn a policy dispute into an alleged legal wrong. So, in mid-October 2005, in a natural evolution, a Spanish judge issued international arrest warrants for three U.S. soldiers arising out of a tank-fire incident in Baghdad that resulted in the collateral deaths of two journalists. The warrant is based on the same claim of transnational jurisdiction once used by American courts to interfere with Paraguay's internal affairs and invoked by Spain to prosecute General Augusto Pinochet for his actions as dictator of Chile. It is also based on a construction of the legal doctrine of proportional use of force that Europeans adhere to but the U.S. does not accept. In essence, the European court is asserting that its interpretation is now "customary."

The 1949 Geneva Conventions and UNCAT were ratified by the United States only with significant reservations. In the case of the former, the U.S. also expressly declined to join a 1977 protocol seeking to extend some prisoner-of-war privileges to insurgents and terrorist groups, as well as to burden military operations with constraints that perversely encourage terrorists to use civilian centers as a shield. But that protocol has been so widely agreed to that many have suggested it is now binding customary law in spite of U.S. protestations. (The U.S. has not helped the situation by signaling ambiguity about the protocol in its military guidelines and State Department comments.) This has made us vulnerable to various international claims, including that our treatment of certain detainees now constitutes a war crime. It has also enormously complicated joint military operations with NATO and other allies in Iraq and the Balkans.

With respect to UNCAT, the U.S. agreed to the torture provisions but with the express caveat that the treaty's entirely *separate* measures, prohibiting

* See Adam Roberts & Richard Guelff, *Documents on the Laws of War* (3rd ed., 2000).

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so-called "cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment" (CID), imposed no greater obligations than already existed under our Constitution—which does not grant rights to alien combatants captured outside the territorial U.S. during wartime.* Nevertheless, in the wake of the Abu Ghraib scandal and the controversy over detainees held without trial at Guantanamo Bay, prominent members of the international community, including the ICRC, have protested that U.S. interrogation and detention practices violate international law. Their theory? UNCAT as a whole has won such broad acceptance that its CID provisions are now binding customary law whether America agrees with them or not.

In December 2005, this relentless portrayal of the United States as an international rogue resulted in Congress's passage of the "McCain Amendment." Under the auspices of prohibiting torture (already quite illegal), the legislation sponsored by Senator John McCain adopted the vague "cruel, inhuman, and degrading" standard effectively to prohibit all forms of coercive interrogation—including those that are not torturous and whose employment has yielded vital intelligence about al Qaeda's operations. Worse, McCain incorporated wholesale into his definition of "cruel, inhuman, and degrading" the protections of the Fifth, Eighth, and Fourteenth Amendments, which the Supreme Court has long held not to have overseas application—much less to extend to the protection of terrorists in wartime. One awaits the further fruits of this ill-conceived maneuver as the international-law movement continues to insist on still other protections for wartime enemies of the sort required by the Supreme Court for criminal defendants in the starkly different realm of domestic policing.

WHAT IS glibly referred to as the "international community" by utopian globalists and those who parrot them is, in point of fact, not a community in any real sense, and most emphatically not in any political sense. That is why the American framers drew a distinct line between appropriate restraints on government power at home and the "federative" powers that had to be available to confront foreign sovereigns and that could not responsibly be hamstrung because the world is a dangerous place.

Customary law is a stealth danger because it encroaches on those powers—and because it erodes the concept of consent that undergirds international legal arrangements. But it is not the only stealth danger. Another major one brings us back to the NGO's. This is the chimera known as the "international law of human rights," which takes aim at nothing less than the pillar of sovereignty itself.

This burgeoning corpus actually traces its roots back to the late 1940's, when international humanitarian law, in the form of the Geneva Conventions, came into being. Even more saliently, it was the era when the nascent UN General Assembly, still reeling from the barbarities of World War II, issued the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This document proclaimed that we are all one human family, all born free and inalienably entitled to life, liberty, personal security, freedom from torture and slavery, equality before the law, and so on.

The soaring rhetoric never became a binding treaty. Indeed, its best-known proponent, Eleanor Roosevelt, acknowledged that it was merely "a statement of principles . . . setting up a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations" and "not a treaty or international agreement . . . impos[ing] legal obligations." It did, however, spawn several compacts, two of which effectively split the Universal Declaration along the cold-war divide.

The first, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), forbids such things as degrading treatment, hate speech, advocacy of war, and unequal burden-sharing in the rearing of children. (A protocol was later tacked on abolishing the death penalty.) The second, the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), is a leftist wish-list: government-underwritten economic sectors, universal health care, comparable-worth compensation, a mandate to end hunger, and the like.

Protocols to both covenants purport to create mechanisms for citizens to seek enforcement against their own governments—in effect, creating the NGO dream of supranational tribunals that will supersede national court systems. These, in typical transnational fashion, are placed under the auspices of the UN High Commission for Human Rights, whose members include such humanitarian stalwarts as Libya, Syria, Sudan, Sierra Leone, and Uganda. Subsets of the commission monitor a host of other human-rights conventions as well: the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, and the aforementioned UNCAT.

* For an extended discussion, see my "Torture: Thinking About the Unthinkable," COMMENTARY, July-August 2004.

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THESE HIGH-MINDED agreements are chockablock with soft-socialist, big-government, pro-illegal-immigration, anti-assimilationist, anti-capital-punishment, and global-village tropes. Some of them are patently unconstitutional, and much in them would not have a prayer of being proposed in plain English by any American politician who wanted to remain viable. But several were indeed signed by President Jimmy Carter. Although only those on civil rights and racial discrimination were ultimately ratified—with significant caveats—ratification was not explicitly rejected in the case of the others; it was simply not proposed.

Therefore, those treaties stand, solemnly executed by this country without critique. In the meantime, the Clinton era also saw the ratification of UNCAT (again with significant reservations, as noted earlier) and the signing of the treaty on children's rights—which, aside from outlawing the juvenile death penalty, has been interpreted as requiring multicultural education and native-language instruction.

Here we see a potentially cataclysmic development: the obligations set forth in these human-rights treaties are claimed by their champions to run to the direct benefit of individuals. They are not conceived of as traditional sovereign-to-sovereign agreements. Rabkin puts the issue well:

> Earlier generations were certainly familiar with claims under international law by which one state might protest the mistreatment of its own citizens when they traveled into the territory of another state. But human-rights law purports to apply to human beings, as such. It purports to protect individuals, even in dealing with their own government. There is nothing international about such a claim.

But there is something international about it now—and the deluge has begun. While American soldiers face a potential war-crimes trial in Spain and American officials confront the same in Germany, our own Supreme Court in just the last two years has invited alien enemy terrorists captured and held by the military overseas to sue the United States—in the middle of a shooting war—to challenge their detention. Relying in part on the unratified treaty on the rights of the child and the decisions of European governments to ban capital punishment, it has ruled as unconstitutional the same democratically enacted juvenile death-penalty statutes that it upheld as constitutional only a few years earlier. And relying in part on the conceit that a claimed right has "been accepted as an integral part of human freedom in many other countries," it has also ruled as unconstitutional the same democratically enacted laws against homosexual sodomy that it upheld as constitutional only a few years earlier.

Tellingly, in the sodomy case, Justice Stephen Breyer expressed the NGO argument for supplanting democratic choice: "There has been no showing that in this country the governmental interest in circumscribing personal choice is somehow more legitimate or urgent" than in other nations that have traveled a presumably more progressive path. As the legal scholar Mary Ann Glendon sagely countered in the *Wall Street Journal*:

> The remarkable implication [of Breyer's ruling] is that it is up to our legislatures to justify a different view of human rights from that accepted elsewhere. This gives short shrift to the fundamental right of Americans to have a say in setting the conditions under which they live—the right that is at the very heart of our unique democratic experiment.

That unique democratic experiment remains vibrant, but it is now threatened on several fronts. Hanging in the balance is not only whether we will emerge as a free, self-determining, sovereign people, but whether we will remain capable of defending ourselves from tyrants and savages who, despite the campaigning of NGO's and other self-appointed international do-gooders, remain quite undeterred by any laws at all.

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OBSERVATIONS

What James Agee Achieved

Algis Valiunas

SOME FAILURES make a bigger impression than most triumphs. The failures that marked the career of James Agee (1909-1955) assured him a legendary status in his own lifetime that he could never have attained had he been merely a good writer—or perhaps even had he been merely a great one. He published only three books before he died: *Permit Me Voyage* (1934), a slender volume of poetry; *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), a long meditation on the lives of Alabama sharecroppers during the Depression; and *The Morning Watch* (1951), a novella about youthful religious infatuation and its abrupt extinction.

AGEE'S SIXTEEN years of service to Henry Luce, turning out anonymous pieces on such things as orchids and steel rails for *Fortune*, and movie reviews and political features for *Time*, earned him consideration as a sort of sharecropper himself. Some people thought these and other freelance pieces of his were brilliant—W.H. Auden praised Agee's movie column in the *Nation* as "the most remarkable regular event in American journalism today"—but deplored his having to do them at all. Such wider fame as he enjoyed came from screenplays (including one for John Huston's *The African Queen*), yet even that was modest. As for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which Lionel Trilling called "the most realistic and most important moral effort of our American generation," it sold 600 copies before being remaindered.

In short, Agee's life was the classic parable of American genius left to founder by an indifferent public and mourned by those who knew what he had in him but could never get out. Only after his death of a heart attack at forty-five did his literary fortunes begin to soar. His unfinished novel, *A Death in the Family*, was published in 1957 and won the Pulitzer Prize. In 1958, a collection of movie reviews and articles, *Agee on Film*, made his reputation as the Coleridge, or Dr. Johnson, of the silver screen; in 1960, a companion volume of five screenplays appeared. That same year, Houghton Mifflin reissued *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*; by the mid-1980's, it had sold nearly a half-million copies.

Also in 1960, a theatrical adaptation of *A Death in the Family* was a hit on Broadway and won another Pulitzer; a film version, *All the Way Home*, followed in 1963. In 1962, the *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, his correspondence with an Episcopalian priest he had known since his Tennessee boyhood, scored a critical and popular success. *The Collected Poems*, most of which had been written over 30 years earlier, came out in 1968, and *The Collected Short Prose* soon afterward.

Now the Library of America has published two volumes of Agee's work,* thereby certifying his eminence. But since such certification comes rather more cheaply than it once did—the Library of America has devoted quite a few volumes to the works of the plainly undeserving—questions remain. What *did* Agee's life and work amount to? Is he one of the great American writers?

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* *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, A Death in the Family, and Shorter Fiction*, 818 pp., $35.00; *Film Writing and Selected Journalism*, 748 pp., $40.00.

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JAMES RUFUS AGEE was born and grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee, where, he would write in *A Death in the Family*, "I lived . . . successfully disguised to myself as a child."* His father, Jay Agee, came from rough-hewn mountain folk, but despite a limited education and youthful drunken indiscretions, he looked to have a promising future with his father-in-law's construction company. James's mother was something of a holy roller in a decorous Anglo-Catholic way, who nurtured her husband's turn toward sober respectability. But their glorious future never arrived: one night Jay drove his car off the road and was killed instantly, the only mark on him a small cut where his chin had struck the steering wheel. James was six.

The fatherless boy cultivated a taste for barbarity, stoning baby robins, placing toads on trolley tracks to watch them get crushed. His savagery was persistent enough for his mother to move the family to the grounds of St. Andrew's, an Episcopalian boarding school for boys near Sewanee. There, the eight-year-old James took to the sage guidance of Father James Flye, who fed his hunger for books and music. He also soon developed religious cravings, mostly of a penitential cast and sometimes running to the lunatic. (He thought of building a large cross in the school's woodshop and having himself crucified, so that pilgrim multitudes would gape in amazement at his holiness.)

At fifteen, James won a scholarship to Phillips Exeter Academy, and from there went on to Harvard, where his furious energies drove him at a breakneck pace. He took to the stage, road-tripped to New York for orgies of movie-going, called regularly on a high-school sweetheart now living in New Hampshire, dated Radcliffe girls on the side, frequented the services of bootleggers, and smoked till his fingers glowed orange. Bored with most of his classes, he nearly washed out academically, but read passionately on his own and wrote stories and poems that made him a local hero. He also sized up the competition: Walt Whitman "seems generally half-assed to me now," Robert Frost was floundering haplessly in "sweetie-pie channels," and the Southern novelist Thomas Wolfe (*You Can't Go Home Again*) had "stolen my whole childhood." There were a few writers worth emulating, however, as he told Father Flye: "I'd like, in a sense, to combine what Chekhov did with what Shakespeare did. . . . I want to *write symphonies*."

YOUTHFUL SUCCESS of the worldly kind—and, no doubt, trepidation that he might never write the great work he knew he had in him—diverted him from the Chekhov-Shakespeare route. As president of the *Advocate*, Harvard's student literary magazine, he had published a parody of *Time*, writing most of the issue himself. Time, Inc. was so bowled over that it hired him fresh out of college as a staff writer for *Fortune*, where he was expected to crank out an unsigned, 5,000-word article every month. It was the Depression, and Agee felt lucky to have any job at all, let alone a choice writing position. But a faltering romance and enforced distraction from his exalted vocation brought him to the verge of suicide, in despair, as he wrote to Father Flye, "of everything I want and everything about myself."

He reconciled himself to life sufficiently to marry Via Saunders, the daughter of a chemistry professor, who had hosted an intellectually tony salon in Cambridge. But supporting a wife in New York meant that Agee's literary dreams were drifting out of reach. "I feel the well-known prison walls distinctly thickening," he wailed to Father Flye, "but if I should tell [the editor of *Fortune*] honestly that side of the story, I'd be out of a job very soon. And then where? And how would I live? And what would happen to Via?"

The publication in 1934 of *Permit Me Voyage*, in the Yale Younger Poets series, exhilarated him briefly; but almost nobody reviewed it and almost nobody bought it. One day, a colleague walked into Agee's office in the Chrysler building and saw him dangling by his fingertips from the window ledge, 50 stories above the pavement. Agee eventually climbed back in, peculiarly composed, and thoughts of suicide gave way to fantasies of assassination: he told anyone who would listen how delicious it would be to stroll into Henry Luce's sanctum and blow him away.

MEANWHILE, AGEE was liberating himself from the bonds of religious faith. In 1936 he wrote to Father Flye that he had become an unbeliever and a man of the Left, leaning toward Communism but not yet committed. A few months later, *Fortune* gave the budding Communist his dream assignment: to write a story about a family of Southern tenant farmers, much-despised poor white trash, living at the borderline of subsistence. Walker Evans would accompany him to Alabama and take photographs for the story. The charming Evans proceeded to get his foot in the door with three penurious families; Agee came to know them all and spent three weeks living with one of them. *Fortune* never ran the story he wrote, but he knew he had found the subject he was born to write about. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which he worked on for the next three years, would be his finest work.

Nothing else in his life went quite so well. He fell out of love with Via and took up with another woman, while Via had an affair with Walker Evans, who had become her husband's best friend. Agee married

* In what follows I draw much from Laurence Bergreen's impressive 1984 biography, *James Agee: A Life*.

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the other woman, Alma Mailman, with whom lovemaking was the purest ecstasy he had ever known. But then he took a notion to share the ecstasy, and convinced Alma to have sex with Evans while he, Agee, sat on the bed and observed. Although he wrote afterward to Evans that "I am enough of an infant homosexual or post-Dostoevskian to be glad" for the experience, evidently he was more normal than he gave himself credit for: an experiment undertaken in the interest of boundless love and supreme knowledge, which seemed so right in conception, appalled him in practice, and gutted his love for Alma.

When Alma became pregnant, Agee found another woman, Mia Fritsch. Alma decamped with the baby to Mexico, where she fell in love with a German Communist writer, and once again Agee cried out of the depths to Father Flye, who suggested he see a psychiatrist. Agee replied that, even realizing he had a drive "toward self-destruction," and knowing "little if anything about its sources or control," he could not consent to psychoanalysis: "I prefer at least a painful degree of spiritual pain and sickness." To this preference he remained true—and since handsome, eloquent, hard-drinking, and chronically unfaithful artist-types usually require a companion in self-destruction, he also married Mia, with whom he would have three children and whom he would betray, inevitably it seems, more than once.

BY 1948, when he was thirty-nine, Agee had saved enough money to kiss Henry Luce goodbye, write his last movie column for the *Nation*, and light out for Chekhov-Shakespeare territory. *The Morning Watch* and *A Death in the Family* were glints in his eye, and he was eager to embrace his long-overdue greatness.

Impediments arose, however. He had become a thorough alcoholic, routinely draining a fifth of bourbon during a convivial evening. The work on his cherished projects slowed. He fled again, this time for Hollywood, going at first for the money but by and by convincing himself that movies were the supreme art of his time. Somehow, between blackouts and adulteries, work got done, some of it, like *The Morning Watch*, serious.

But the rampaging abuse took him down. His first heart attack in 1951 slowed him, if only briefly. As he proclaimed to Walker Evans, every man worthy of the name "has the right, even the obligation, to write (or other vocational work) and to f— as much as he can and in the ways he prefers to, even if doing so shortens his life or kills him on the spot." But it would be neither work nor sex that did him in; the drinking and the smoking beat them to it. Repeated minor heart attacks became part of the drill; one May morning in New York in 1955, taking a cab to his doctor's office, he jackknifed with his final heart attack. The *New York Times* obituary mentioned that he had been a "poet, critic, and sensitive writer in many media."

NOWHERE WAS it said that he had written one of the most extraordinary works of non-fiction prose by an American in the 20th century, to be measured beside the literary summits of Henry Adams, William James, and George Santayana. But that was indeed Agee's achievement in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, whose bitterly ironic title is taken from the book of Ben Sira, or Ecclesiasticus, in the Apocrypha. The plight of farmers reduced to virtual serfdom in the preeminent capitalist democracy sounds like the choicest opportunity for a leftist screed: the gasoline is just waiting for the match. Agee, however, was no mere political incendiary. What he was after was the truth of these battered lives as "the whole of consciousness" might apprehend it, and neither Marxist boilerplate nor conventional literary imagination fit his intention.

In 400 pages, Agee sketches the feudal arrangement between landlord and tenant; details the tenants' houses, furniture, and clothing with an overflowing heart and a camera's disinterested exactitude; describes the routine ordeal of planting, tending, and picking cotton that "goes on each day from can to can't"; explores the complex dynamic between himself and the people he is writing about, including their warming toward his citified strangeness and the erotic charm his novelty and gentle manner exert on a young girl; deplores the habitual triviality of journalists and the spiritual destitution of intellectuals; declares himself "a Communist by sympathy and conviction" and then proceeds to excoriate the terrible pride of revolutionaries, a mortal sin as sure to ravage human hopes as capitalist greed; flagellates himself for his unworthiness as a man and an artist to approach the alien tortured souls he is writing about; and keens, rants, sighs, frets, effuses, and speculates about the dire glory of living on this earth.

Despite its subject, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* can hardly be called a work of sociology. Only by breaking down the categories of sociological and economic and political classification, Agee believes, can one begin to see the living man. In addition to the usual taxonomies of social science, the usual confusions and incomprehensions of ordinary living must also be seen through and surpassed, so that that each individual and each moment might be known under the aspect of eternity. For Agee, who illustrates this point in prose of soaring fire, there is "no beauty less" in the homely than in the hieratic. In a shack unfit for human habitation, breakfast rituals acquire, for him, the holy glow he knew as an altar boy in chapel.

Thus he makes the reader understand even these wretched lives as sacred. But so brutally wretched

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are they that one must also recognize how deeply their sanctity is violated at every turn. The farmers' poverty reaches a depth of misery and deprivation unthinkable for the working poor in America today. Ceaseless grueling toil to no end but animal survival—and barely that—leaves human bodies used up in what ought to be the prime of life. Those with no choice in the matter and no knowledge of anything better grow accustomed to the intolerable. The texture of life is oily, clammy, grimy, and phlegm-encrusted. Vermin have the run of the place. Despite any efforts to make their homes less unpleasant—and most have already given up trying—foulness permeates every inch:

> The odors of sweat in many stages of age and freshness, this sweat being a distillation of pork, lard, corn, woodsmoke, pine, and ammonia. The odors of sleep, of bedding and of breathing, for the ventilation is poor. The odors of all the dirt that in the course of time can accumulate in a quilt and mattress. Odors of staleness from clothes hung or stored away, not washed. I should further describe the odor of corn: in sweat, or on the teeth, and breath, when it is eaten as much as they eat it, it is of a particular sweet stuffy fetor, to which the nearest parallel is the odor of the yellow excrement of a baby.

More painful than the damage done to bodies and the insult to the senses is the unconscionable wastage of mind. Some of the farm folk are illiterate, while some can read and write a bit; some are mentally feeble, some capable of better things but destined never to know them: "these intellects died before they were born; they hang behind their eyes like fetuses in alcohol." And among these poor an intractable moral coarseness defies any reformist zeal for a new dawn:

> Here I can only say that in the people of this country you care most for, pretty nearly without exception you must reckon in traits, needs, diseases, and above all mere natural habits, differing from our own, of a casualness, apathy, self-interest, unconscious, offhand, and deliberate cruelty, in relation toward extra-human life and toward negroes, terrible enough to freeze your blood or to break your heart or to propel you toward murder. . . .

AS AGEE does not concoct imaginary virtues for his downtrodden subjects, neither does he demonize the landowners who exploit and despise the tenant farmers. In one remarkable passage he declares—contrary to the prevailing wisdom of the time—that the rich are not to be hated even for their vast indifference to the sufferings of the poor.

Agee seems to conceive of the human condition as so blighted by original sin that all sinners deserve absolution, in a world so hard that one man's life, whatever his station, is essentially as painful and ultimately as blameless as the next man's. At the same time, he displays a more conventional moral compass: to try to ease the suffering of those on the bottom—knowing all the while that the world is setting you up for failure—offers a long-shot hope of saving yourself. He can thus sound by turns like a hard-shelled conservative, a too-forgiving liberal, a dreamy Communist, and a skeptic who knows how dreams of re-making humanity become waking nightmares.

What he remains throughout is a man trying his own soul and desperate to find some vestige of purity there. Though human cruelty, rapacity, and folly appall him, he fights off his native indignation in the name of love for humanity. This quality alone sets *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* apart from the classic literature about poverty in the great capitalist democracies, in which indignation tends to shoulder love for humanity out of the picture.

Friedrich Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844), for example, perhaps the one Marxist book not yet stripped of all moral authority, hardly seems authoritative at all beside Agee's work. The slum-dwellers in whose name Engels professes to write are ciphers, their pains significant only in the aggregate, insofar as they might inspire loathing for the modern industrial dispensation and kindle the wrath that will bring it down. To portray real men would only complicate matters unduly, so Engels prefers to draw abstract proletarians as pitiable brutes who somehow happen to embody all human virtue.

Christian philanthropists can be almost as blinkered and tendentious as Marxists. Jane Addams, the patron saint of American social workers, declares in *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910) that the foundation of her work is a belief in "the solidarity of the human race, a philosophy which will not waver when the race happens to be represented by a drunken woman or an idiot boy." But her philosophy does not prevent her from—perhaps even provokes her to—a brutal moralizing in the name of public spiritedness: when typhoid fever kills the daughter of a self-sufficient woman who had not joined in "public efforts to secure a better code of tenement-house sanitation," Addams sees hard justice at work. Dutifully Addams preaches doing good to people you don't like and then condemns those who fail to recognize the superior virtue of such behavior; in uncontrollable heartbreak, Agee simply demonstrates his rapturous love for all the living and his sorrow that he is not good enough to sustain this love at the highest pitch. But then Agee was never a practical sort.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is not without its flagrant excesses. Writing of his own feelings, Agee is given to far too many agonies of conscience over trifles. And the or-

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nate style gets to be a trial when it is not a delight. Adjectives make Agee delirious, and he almost never uses one when five or six will do. Ethereal syntax occasionally seems designed to abolish earthly meaning altogether. Passages of ecstatic precision alternate with others of all but unintelligible gush, where one suspects the whisky is doing the writing.

But then there are instances of perfect observation and insight:

> The young man's eyes had the opal lightings of dark oil and, though he was watching me in a way that relaxed me to cold weakness of ignobility, they fed too strongly inward to draw to a focus: whereas those of the young woman had each the splendor of a monstrance, and were brass. Her body also was brass or bitter gold, strong to stridency beneath the unbleached clayed cotton dress, and her arms and bare legs were sharp with metal down. . . . There was in their eyes so quiet and ultimate a quality of hatred, and contempt, and anger, toward every creature in existence beyond themselves, and toward the damages they sustained, as shone scarcely short of a state of beatitude; nor did this at any time modify itself.

Agee's gift is to hold this hatred in his heart and transform it into a democratic sacrament of compassion, which all who see these persons through his eyes can partake of. Thanks to this reverence for every human life and grief for every pang endured by a suffering creature, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* suggests the possibility of intimate understanding among people so alien to each other they might seem to be of different species.

AGEE NEVER wrote anything else of comparable genius, though everything he wrote displays exceptional talent. *A Death in the Family*, the most celebrated of his other books, relives the accident that killed his father and the family's response to that loss. The novel is rich with remembrance of the simple gestures of familial love, and the predominant note is of rapt, elegiac tenderness, as in the opening prose poem, "Knoxville: Summer 1915," which evokes an evening like any other for a boy in the bosom of his happy family: "By some chance, here they are, all on this earth; and who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth, lying, on quilts, on the grass, in a summer evening, among the sounds of the night."*

The Tolstoyan theme of this novel is the effort of selfish and stumbling humanity somehow to show itself equal not only to shattering tragedy but also to the casual beauty of ordinary evenings like this one. Agee's characteristic longing for purity of heart is here once again in tension with his love of life in all its moral variegation, and once again it is hard to tell which he really valued more.

IN *A Death in the Family*, Agee definitively recovered his childhood from the thieving clutches of Thomas Wolfe, and could also claim preeminence over that rival in the field of provincial Southern lyric heartache. He could rightly claim preeminence in the field of film criticism as well—which does not mean the Library of America was obliged to gather over 500 pages of movie reviews in a second Agee volume. The greatest critics have recorded their engagement with great art; there simply was very little of great art to be found in the movies Agee wrote about, and his reviews themselves are mostly ephemeral notices of ephemera. One would be happy to have a handful of the more interesting full-length articles, like those on silent movie comedies and D.W. Griffith, along with a dozen of the best reviews; less—a lot less—would definitely be more. As it is, *Film Writing and Selected Journalism* only confirms what Agee's friends and admirers believed during his lifetime: he should have been doing something better.

Of course no one ever accomplishes all he sets out to do in the transports of youth; but James Agee was remarkable for the magnitude of his ambition, the profligacy with which he squandered his gifts, the consternation his failures caused him, and the high quality of the work he managed to produce in spite of his determined efforts at self-destruction. He went at life as though he were a nobleman in the bitterest of operettas who commands wealth beyond all counting, buys caviar and champagne for everyone in the house night after night, breakfasts on the leftovers with a different mistress every morning (only one of whom he loves), and dies bankrupt and alone of a broken heart in a low-rent hotel, his friends amusing themselves elsewhere, a handful of diamonds strewn atop his dresser among the shirt studs and billets-doux. A wiser man could have lived happily on the diamonds for a very long time; but diamonds like these rarely fall into the hands of the merely wise.

* Samuel Barber, who was a friend of Agee's, set several passages of this prose poem to ravishing music for soprano and orchestra. Barber also wrote the most beautiful 20th-century American art song I know, "Sure on This Shining Night," to the words of an Agee poem.

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OBSERVATIONS

Israel's Media Problem

Hillel Halkin

THERE WAS a time in Israel when I occasionally watched the news on BBC and CNN. Although they did a mediocre job of presenting it, they covered the globe more fully than did the Israeli television channels.

Eventually, though, I got so angry that I stopped. I can remember one of the last times before I did. A suicide bombing had killed several Israelis that morning and there had been a retaliatory air strike against a PLO installation in Gaza that the Israeli air force knew to be empty of people. While nobody was injured, one bomb fell on a wing of a building that was used by a Palestinian marching band. CNN took ample note of this. After mentioning the terrorist attack in a sentence, with no footage shown of its victims, it dwelled for long moments on the mangled trumpets and shredded drums of the marching band. Clearly, only a ruthless enemy would take revenge on innocent musical instruments.

In her new book, *The Other War: Israelis, Palestinians, and the Struggle for Media Supremacy*, Stephanie Gutmann remarks that media treatment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has of late grown slightly more balanced.* But slanted reports like the one on CNN, appearing day after day in numerous major newspapers and television newscasts, continue to be the main reason for Israel's poor image around the world. What the average person knows, or thinks he knows, about this conflict comes almost entirely from the media, and media bias against Israel has been enormous.

Why has it been? Gutmann, a working journalist herself who descends on one side of her family from Zionist stock (her grandfather, Nachum Gutmann, was a prominent Palestinian Jewish artist) and on the other, as she tells us, "from a bunch of New-Englandy WASP's led by a matriarch grandmother who literally used to wince if she had to say the word 'Jew,'" has a professional's perspective. She does not, that is, dwell on the "big" explanations commonly given by Israel's supporters for its unpopularity: anti-Semitism, Israel's place in contemporary anti-colonialist discourse, its close association with America in an increasingly anti-American world, and so forth. What concerns her, rather, is the nuts and bolts of reporting from the field and the ground-level vantage point of those doing it, about which she has perceptive points to make. Some of these I can personally vouch for from three years in the mid-1990's in which I functioned as an Israeli correspondent for the New York weekly *Forward*.

FEW FOREIGN correspondents are particularly well-educated. Most go from one posting to another and rarely stay at any for more than a few years. They usually arrive in a country with only a cursory knowledge of its history; rent living quarters in an expensive and far from typical neighborhood in its capital; never learn to speak its language or languages with any proficiency; and socialize heavily among themselves. At the same time, they are expected to present themselves as highly knowledgeable about the place they are reporting from and to file daily stories beginning the moment they

HILLEL HALKIN, *who lives in Israel, reviewed* The Poems of Charles Reznikoff, 1918-1975 *in last month's issue.*

* Encounter, 280 pp., $25.95.

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arrive. Moreover, these stories must compete for space and prominence with others filed from elsewhere and must satisfy an editorial staff in a home office that worries it is being outdone by rival media.

Everywhere, this tends to produce foreign correspondents who are heavily dependent for their information and point of view on each other and on the small number of official and unofficial native sources they manage to cultivate; who view the country they are covering as much through the prism of other countries they have been in as in terms of its own uniqueness; who have little time for research, being required to churn out copy at a steady rate; who are forced to concentrate on the dramatic and superficial at the expense of the in-depth and explanatory; and who fear nothing worse than being caught out of step with their colleagues.

And if this is true generally, it is even truer of journalists writing about Israel and the Palestinians. One reason that this is so, as Gutmann points out, is that Israel is probably the most reported-on country on earth. Dozens of major newspapers and TV networks maintain permanent staffs and offices in it, and when there are major events to cover, these are massively augmented from abroad. This greatly increases the element of competitiveness—and with it, paradoxical though it may seem, the element of conformism.

Moreover, while in Israel, as in any democracy, journalists are free to go where they wish and talk to whom they want, there are two crucial and closely related exceptions to this rule. One involves places in the occupied or Palestinian territories to which access is limited or barred by the Israeli army; the other, the danger posed to free movement in these same territories by armed Palestinians, who are everywhere a law unto themselves. And because these exceptions directly affect that aspect of reporting from Israel which foreign journalists are most interested in, namely, Jewish-Arab violence and everything surrounding it—a military dragnet in the West Bank, say, for wanted terrorists, or an interview with a Palestinian "resistance fighter" in a refugee shantytown, or an army closure on a Palestinian city—they assume great importance and force the foreign correspondent to deal frequently with two types of intermediaries.

On the Israeli side, there is the military, whether in the form of commanding officers in the field or the spokesman's office of the Israel Defense Forces, which briefs reporters on military events, answers their queries, lets them know what is off-limits at a given moment, and sometimes provides them with an English-speaking escort when they wish to visit sensitive areas.

On the Palestinian side, there is the "fixer," as he or she is called by Gutmann and other journalists. This is a person, generally young, educated, and with a good command of English, who accompanies correspondents in the territories, informs them of interesting subjects and possible scoops, arranges appointments and interviews for them, translates for them from the Arabic, explains to them nuances of scenes or conversations that they may have missed, knows the back roads and streets that will get them around military checkpoints, and acts as a guarantor of their safety, assuring local residents that they are not Israeli secret agents and negotiating their way into and out of potentially difficult situations. "Fixers" are not cheap, but a good one is an indispensable asset, and just about all foreign correspondents in Israel have their regular or regulars on whom they depend.

HERE, AS Gutmann describes it and as I can confirm, is where a major part of the problem sets in. A journalist's dealings with the Israeli army, or with institutions like the government press office and the foreign ministry, are of a formal nature and frequently cumbersome and annoying. There is bureaucracy and delay; requests may go unanswered or be turned down; harried soldiers on duty can be snappish and in any case are forbidden to be interviewed; answers to questions come in vague officialese; and while the journalist may sometimes gets to know the officials who give these answers, relations with them are rarely personal.

With one's "fixer," on the other hand, it is just the opposite. Everything is informal and personal. There are no rules and regulations, decisions can be made and carried out on the spur of the moment, and the more personable and skillful the "fixer" is, the more he or she can do for you. Needless to say, too, the more it is likely that a friendship, or at least a shared sense of camaraderie, will develop from this.

Since one's "fixer" is generally an intelligent and articulate expounder of the Palestinian point of view, this puts Israel at a disadvantage—all the more so because, whereas the correspondent's dealings with Israelis take place mostly in offices, at press conferences, and at army roadblocks, the "fixer" often brings him to Palestinian homes, where he is introduced to families, treated graciously, and told the stories of the people he meets and their complaints against the Israeli occupation. He is thus far more likely to encounter Palestinians who have suffered from Israeli military action than Israelis who have suffered from Palestinian terror—and if he does get to know Israeli families, they are likely to live in his own upper-class neighborhood and belong to the socio-economic group that least frequently rides the buses, shops in the markets, or resides in the places where terror commonly strikes, and that is also the most liberal, dovish, and pro-Palestinian of any in Israel.

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IT IS not surprising, then, that even if they do not take up their posts with a bias against Israel, many journalists develop one during their stay there. In *The Other War*, Stephanie Gutmann shows at length how an identification with the Palestinians affects their treatment of both the conflict as a whole and of specific incidents in it. In sharply observant prose that is often quite funny in its eye for the foolish, the vacuous, the hypocritical, and the absurd, she documents case after case of events being badly distorted to Israel's detriment by supposedly responsible journalists. These include the Muhammad al-Dura affair, the lynching of two Israelis by a Palestinian mob in Ramallah in October 2000, the interception by Israel's navy of the arms-running Palestinian freighter *Karine A* in January 2002, and the Israeli assault on Jenin in April of that year.

In the first and last of these incidents, Israel was accused and convicted by foreign journalists, with a powerfully negative impact throughout the world, of atrocities it never committed. In the second, an especially brutal horror carried out with the collaboration of the Palestinian police was treated by the media as simply one more link in the chain of Israeli-Palestinian violence, even though it did more than anything else in those years to revolt Israelis and harden their attitudes. In the third, a dramatic instance of Palestinian Authority duplicity, so great that it contributed to the Bush administration's reevaluation of Yasir Arafat and its decision to cut its ties with him, was downplayed.

Incidents such as these also illustrate two other points that Gutmann makes. One (although it is here, she observes, that major improvements have recently been made) is the sheer incompetence that has plagued the Israeli government's treatment of the media. Poor logistics; interoffice rivalries; badly trained spokesmen; the brusque manners that Israelis perceive to be a form of honesty and directness but that foreigners often experience as rudeness; a traditionally Jewish "disputative, verbal, parsing culture," as Gutmann puts it, that has little patience with journalists' inability to grasp the intricate workings of the Israeli mind; and the despairing attitude that, since the world will always be against Israel anyway, there is no point in trying to argue with it—such things have combined to make Israel's *hasbara* (a Hebrew word meaning literally "explaining," but taking in all aspects of public relations) ineffective. In the case of the *Karine A*, for example, in which the Palestinians were caught smuggling a huge shipment of forbidden weaponry and proceeded to lie their heads off about it, *hasbara* produced, Gutmann writes, a "great yawn" in which a "major story was almost consigned to oblivion."

THE SECOND point is Palestinian intimidation. The mixture of authoritarianism and lawlessness that characterizes the Palestinian Authority and the society very partially governed by it makes it easy to threaten foreign correspondents and to ensure that, if they value their jobs and their persons, they will not investigate or publish stories that may embarrass the wrong people or the right cause. In the case of the Ramallah lynching, for instance, TV cameramen on the scene were warned not to film it and, when they did, were forced to surrender their tapes (one had his camera smashed to the ground); the Israeli bureau chief of the Italian channel RTI, the only TV station to get a tape of the incident out and show it to the world, was forced to leave her post by Palestinian threats on her life; and a rival Italian channel's producer wrote a fawning letter to the Palestinian press apologizing for RTI's footage and promising that his own team would "always respect the journalistic rules of the Palestinian Authority." This is not, to put it mildly, an atmosphere conducive to honest reporting.

One might think that such intimidation would backfire, yet it rarely seems to. For one thing, foreign correspondents cannot afford to defy it, since those who do so will quite simply be unable to operate in the territories in the future. Furthermore, there are some who, like Riccardo Cristiano, the Italian producer, actually condone it. After all, if the story they are covering is that of the oppression of one people by another, it is surely possible to understand that the oppressed have the right to take measures that will get their message across. Relating a conversation with an American reporter who considered Israeli soldiers "absolutely barbaric" and defended focusing his camera on Palestinian children throwing stones while deliberately turning it away from Palestinian gunman carrying arms, Gutmann comments:

> [W]hat really bothered me was that, once again, I was seeing a journalist (a photojournalist in this case) who seemed to live very comfortably with dual standards on the issue of press censorship. In other words, it was okay for Palestinian *fedayeen* to virtually dictate how they would be covered ("they don't want to be photographed with guns, so I don't do it"), while Israeli soldiers and government officials weren't given the right to a choice.

The Other War is illuminating because Gutmann knows what makes journalists tick. They are not intellectuals, and she does not treat them as though they were. And yet like everyone, and perhaps a bit more than most people, journalists are influenced by the intellectual currents of their times—and these currents have been running against Israel for many years now. No doubt they would have been less fierce had history taken a different turn in 1967 and thereafter, and had Israel not ended up ruling militarily for decades over several million Pales-

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tinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. And yet even an Israel that had never extended beyond its 1967 borders would have found itself in intellectual disrepute today.

The 1960's and 70's, after all, saw not only the entrenchment of the Israeli occupation, but also the rise of postmodernism—and postmodernist thought is intrinsically hostile to much of what Israel is about. An Israel confined to its 1948 borders would still have defined itself, against the protests of its Arab minority, as a Jewish rather than a multicultural state; would still have sought to maintain a demographic balance favorable to Jews by means of ethnically discriminatory immigration laws; would still have had a large Orthodox population that decried liberal values and called for state promulgation of religion; would still have needed to maintain a strong military force and military ethos to defend itself; would still have been accused of nationalism, militarism, and racism; would still have been charged with driving the Palestinians from their land; would still have been criticized for barring their return. And not least, it would still have been confronted with contemporary relativism and its devaluation of the notion of objective truth—a relativism that, already eighty years ago, was called by the French thinker Julien Benda "*la trahison des clercs*," the betrayal of the intellectuals.

Benda's book by that name, published in 1927, has been largely remembered for its title alone. Yet it deserves to be remembered for more. Writing at the height of modernism, Benda was one of the first to discern the coming emergence of postmodernist attitudes. The intellectuals of Europe, he argued, were selling out: not to the lures of the marketplace—this was not yet the age of the cushy academic appointment, the lucratively paying think tank, the fat book contract, the TV celebrity status, or the ready ticket to international conferences—but to the excitement of the world of action and to the belief that the eternal verities that had concerned thinkers in the past were neither eternal, veracious, nor worth thinking about unless they could be pressed into the service of temporal, that is, political causes.

The intellectual who no longer asked "Is this so?" but rather "What effect does saying this have?"—or, to put it more crassly, "Whose interests does saying this serve?"—was the intellectual, Benda wrote, who had betrayed his calling. Much of *La trahison des clercs* is thus involved in tracing how, beginning with Nietzsche and Marx, 19th- and 20th-century European thought was becoming increasingly instrumental, so that instead of a determinable something known as "truth," there were only, to use a contemporary term not yet fashionable in Benda's day, competing "narratives."

What seemed a deplorable trend to Benda has now become the regnant ideology of our times. And this is bad for Israel, because the Zionist narrative, as gripping as it may seem to those who tell it as their own, is not, when set against the Palestinian narrative that opposes it, terribly convincing in an age that has a short attention span and distrusts the claims of history.

It is complicated, that Zionist narrative, a long account of many wanderings, homes, transformations, and identities, especially as compared with the simple Palestinian narrative of a people that has ostensibly always been who and where it is. The Zionist narrative summons as its witnesses sacred texts and ancient documents, its interpretation of which it expects others to accept as relevant and correct. It is associated with Western colonialism and its injustices rather than with the colonized and their struggles. It pits Jewish exile and the Holocaust against the Palestinian refugee problem and the Israeli occupation; the sufferings of the past and of the dead against those of the present and the living; first-world victims of terror against third-world victims of dispossession; national rights against human rights. (The Palestinians have their nationalism, too, but it is not so essential to their case as Zionism is to Israel's.)

For most contemporary intellectuals, this is a narrative that quite simply does not have what it takes. At best, it is put by them on a par with its Palestinian rival, so that one ends up with a "meta-narrative," two contradictory versions of history between which it is impossible and unnecessary to choose because they are ultimately equal and symmetrical. Here is a people that has suffered and here is a people that has suffered; here is one with great traumas and here is one with great traumas; here a lost homeland has been repossessed and here a possessed homeland has been lost; here and here is the inability to recognize the "Other," making both sides brutal and murderous with rage and hatred. And as these narratives are symmetrical, so are the acts committed in their names: the death of an Israeli killed by a Palestinian suicide bomb in Tel Aviv and the "targeted assassination" of the bomber's dispatcher by an Israeli rocket in Gaza, the killing of Muhammad al-Dura and the lynching of two Israelis.

BUT OF COURSE Muhammad al-Dura, we now know, was killed, if indeed he was killed at all, not by Israeli soldiers but by Palestinians. The fact that the lie deliberately fabricated about his death was eventually exposed, not by any of the scores of foreign correspondents stationed in Israel who had helped spread it (and who had access to Palestinian sources that Israeli journalists did not) but by others, among them an Israeli army investigatory team and a German-Jewish documentary film-maker, is a badge of shame for the international media. As is also, one might add, the same media's doing next to nothing

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to publicize the true story, much less to apologize for its role in concealing it, once it became known.*

And yet, one might ask, why blame the journalists? For longer than some of them have been alive, their profession has operated in a world whose intellectual luminaries have declared that there is no point in looking for the truth because it either cannot be found or is trivial if it can be. Even a Foucault or a Derrida, one presumes, would concede that Muhammad al-Dura either was or was not killed by an Israeli bullet. But since even if he was not, he might have been, and if he might have been, he might as well have been (after all, haven't some Palestinian children been killed by Israeli soldiers? why, then, quibble about their names?), it would be churlish to deny the Palestinian narrative its right to him.

For foreign correspondents in Israel, such assumptions provide a convenient perspective. Knowledge of the past is not their strong suit; for most of them, the 1967 war that brought about the occupation of the territories is an ancient event of uncertain origins, to say nothing of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the British Mandate, and the Balfour Declaration, let alone the story of Zionism, much less the Jewish history that preceded it. It is easier for them not to bother with such things and to think of the events they are reporting on as self-enclosed, the vicious tit-for-tat of a blood feud that began when Israel conquered the West Bank and the Gaza Strip or, at the very earliest, when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were forced to flee their homes by the creation of a Jewish state, and that is therefore Israel's fault. To ask what came before this, or what the larger meaning of it might be, makes no more sense to the average journalist than it would make to ask what existed before the universe was created. And to spend time trying to investigate the death of Muhammad al-Dura or similar matters is, so this journalist has been taught, to look for more trouble than it is worth.

It is encouraging to think that—if Stephanie Gutmann is right—the media do respond, even if not as much as one might wish, to improvements in Israel's *hasbara*. But to think of *hasbara* as merely public relations is to take only the ground-level view. Israel's battle to make its case heard and understood is part of a larger battle to assert the importance of history and historical truth in a world in which they no longer matter very much. It is even, one might say, part of the battle against the intellectual betrayals of post-modernism itself.

In that sense, unless *hasbara* is conceived of as truly explaining, and not just as PR, Israel will continue to lose the war for public opinion. In the long run, the truth is its most reliable weapon, even if it is one that can only be wielded effectively by those willing to risk self-inflicted wounds. For if the truth is, generally speaking, on Israel's side, it may not be so in every case, and the temptation to tailor it when it is not, which *hasbara* has not been free of, is the temptation to resort to propaganda. And in a war of Jewish propaganda versus Arab propaganda—or, if one prefers, of Jewish versus Arab narratives—the Arabs will always win. They are simply much better at it. The first rule of warfare is to fight on the ground that is most advantageous to oneself.

* See "Myth, Fact, and the al-Dura Affair" by Nidra Poller, COMMENTARY, September 2005.

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MUSIC

The Beatles Now

Terry Teachout

THE BEATLES released *Let It Be*, the last of their thirteen albums, 36 years ago.[1] Today there is no one musical group or soloist capable of commanding the attention paid to John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr between 1964, when they first appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and 1970, when McCartney announced that the group was disbanding. Just as there is no longer a common culture, so there is no longer a common style of music to which most English-speaking people listen. Yet the Beatles and their music continue to fascinate successive generations of music lovers, so much so that more than two dozen books have been published about them, the latest of which is a thousand-page biography by the journalist Bob Spitz.[2]

Written in a straightforwardly journalistic style, *The Beatles: The Biography* provides an exhaustive and generally reliable account of the bandmembers' lives and careers up to 1970, and is of no small value as a study in what might be called the sociology of celebrity. But like most pop-music biographies, it has little of interest to say about the Beatles' work; anyone in search of a thoughtful critical appraisal will find it unhelpful.[3]

Such an appraisal must begin by taking into account the fact that the Beatles were the first rock-and-roll musicians to be written about *as* musicians. Elvis Presley, for instance, had attracted vast amounts of attention from the press, but for the most part he was treated as a mass-culture phenomenon rather than as an artist, and so were the other rock musicians of the 50's and early 60's (and the swing-era bandleaders and vocalists who came before them). Not so the Beatles. Almost from the time they began making records in 1962, their music was taken seriously—and praised enthusiastically—by such noted classical composers as Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, and Ned Rorem and such distinguished critics and commentators as William Mann, Hans Keller, and Wilfrid Mellers.

What was it that made these four musically untutored pop stars stand out in such high relief from their contemporaries? And has their music proved to be of lasting interest, as their admirers of four decades ago predicted it would?

IN ONE sense, "the Beatles" can be understood as a shorthand term for the songs written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney, separately and together, between 1962 and 1970. (The two wrote some songs individually and some in collaboration, but all were credited as the joint work of "Lennon-McCartney.")

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[1] The Beatles' commercial recordings have all been transferred to CD and remain in print. Readers unfamiliar with their music should listen first to *Rubber Soul* (Capitol 46440) and *Revolver* (46441). Also of interest is *The Beatles 1* (29325), an anthology of 27 of the group's chart-topping singles. Except as indicated, all of the songs mentioned in this piece are included on these three CD's.

[2] *The Beatles: The Biography*, Little, Brown, 983 pp., $29.95.

[3] By far the best book published to date about the Beatles' music is Allan Kozinn's *The Beatles* (Phaidon, $24.95, paper), a brief life published as part of the "20th-Century Composers" series of classical-music monographs edited by Norman Lebrecht.

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Most of the Beatles' hit singles were Lennon-McCartney songs, many of which would later be performed and recorded by other artists. It was the best of these songs that initially won them the respect of musicians who had hitherto been indifferent or hostile to rock-and-roll.

Lennon and McCartney began to write together as teenagers. Their first hits—"Love Me Do," "She Loves You," and "I Want to Hold Your Hand"—were largely derivative of the lyrically naïve styles of the American pop stars of the 50's whom they most admired, including Elvis, Little Richard, and the Everly Brothers. But even back then their music contained surprising glints of originality, in particular the modally colored tunes that would become one of their trademarks.[4] Within a brief time it became evident that, for all their lack of formal training, they were naturally gifted composers whose fast-growing musical sophistication was reminiscent of the similarly rapid stylistic evolution of another self-taught songwriter of genius, Irving Berlin.

By 1964 the two were experimenting with the irregular phrase lengths and unexpectedly complex harmonies of such songs as "And I Love Her" (by McCartney) and "If I Fell" (by Lennon), whose stereotypical boy-meets-girl lyrics are far less interesting than the graceful, sinuous melodies to which they are set.[5] Indeed, it was for their music that Lennon and McCartney were first acclaimed, and it would not be until McCartney's "Yesterday" that they recorded a song whose lyrics were of correspondingly high quality.

Written in 1965, "Yesterday" is a perfectly balanced miniature whose long arches of melody arise organically out of the three-note cell ("*Yes*-ter-day") that constitutes the introductory phrase. The lyric is no less noteworthy for its unadorned directness: "Yesterday/All my troubles seemed so far away/Now it looks as though they're here to stay/Oh, I believe in yesterday." The result is a song reminiscent in its deceptive simplicity of classic Berlin ballads like "All Alone" and "Always," a fact that helps to explain why it was the first Beatles song to become a full-fledged pop standard. (It has been recorded by more than 2,000 other artists.)

Around the same time, Lennon began to listen closely to the music of Bob Dylan, whose deliberately, even self-consciously poetic lyrics constituted a radical departure from the more conventional approach of his commercially-minded peers. Thanks in part to Dylan's influence, Lennon made his own, similar break with the clichés of the day, beginning to write allusive, increasingly cryptic lyrics that had little in common with the pop songs on which he had been raised: "He's a real nowhere man/Sitting in his nowhere land/Making all his nowhere plans for nobody/Doesn't have a point of view/Knows not where he's going to/Isn't he a bit like you and me?" ("Nowhere Man," 1965).

Unlike the professional-tradition songwriters of the pre-rock era, Lennon and McCartney lost interest in writing about romantic love, and from 1966 until the dissolution of the Beatles four years later they produced an amazingly varied portfolio of songs whose subject matter ranged from the wry domesticity of McCartney's "Lady Madonna" ("Lady Madonna/Children at your feet/ Wonder how you manage to make ends meet") to the unsettling surrealism of Lennon's "She Said She Said" ("She said/I know what it's like to be dead/I know what it is to be sad/ And she's making me feel like I've never been born"). These songs were as powerfully influential on the rock musicians of the 70's and 80's as the recordings of Louis Armstrong were on the jazz soloists of the 30's and 40's, and their echo continues to be heard in the work of singer-songwriters not yet born in the days when the Beatles were still (in Lennon's much-quoted 1966 remark) "more popular than Jesus."

YET FOR all the immense influence of the Lennon-McCartney songs, only "Yesterday" became a standard in the old-fashioned sense—that is, a song that continues to be regularly performed by large numbers of other singers. Indeed, not until the 90's did classic-style pop singers born in the 60's and 70's start to reinterpret the songs of the Beatles in the same way that their predecessors had reinterpreted the classic songs of the pre-rock era.[6]

One reason for this is that the Beatles wrote most of their own material, recording only Beatles-written songs from 1966 on. Once this became common practice for most other rock groups, it was harder for "standards" to emerge from the vast body of new pop music. No less important, though, is the fact that the Beatles were among the first pop musicians to start thinking in terms of recordings, not songs or live performances, as the finished musical product that they would offer to the listening public.

Airchecks of their TV appearances indicate that while none of the four Beatles was an instrumental virtuoso, all of them were effective stage performers with an engaging, distinctive group style.[7] For the most part, their earliest recordings sought to reproduce this style, albeit in more polished form. But by 1965 the Beatles had become so

[4] Like most self-taught musicians who start out playing guitar rather than piano, both Lennon and McCartney were conditioned by the feel of the guitar fingerboard, whose stepwise layout facilitates the harmonization of the flattened-seventh, Mixolydian-mode melodies first heard in such early Beatles songs as "Can't Buy Me Love" and "A Hard Day's Night."

[5] Both songs are included on *A Hard Day's Night* (Capitol 46437).

[6] See, for example, John Pizzarelli's 1999 album, *John Pizzarelli Meets the Beatles* (RCA 61432).

[7] Some of these recordings have been collected on *Live at the BBC* (Capitol 31796, two CD's). In live performance, George Harrison played lead guitar, Lennon rhythm guitar, McCartney bass guitar, and Ringo Starr drums, with Lennon and McCartney splitting most of the lead vocals.

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popular—and their female fans so hysterically voluble—that they could barely hear themselves play over the screaming of the crowds that came to their concerts. This caused them to lose interest in live performance at more or less the same moment that George Martin, the classically trained musician who produced their recordings, began to introduce them to the fast-growing range of techniques by which recorded sound could be manipulated and transformed in the studio.

It soon became clear to Lennon and McCartney that the sound of "the Beatles" on record need not be restricted to the simple guitar-bass-drums instrumentation of their live concerts. McCartney, for example, recorded "Yesterday" accompanied by his own acoustic guitar and a string quartet arranged by Martin. In 1965 the band released *Rubber Soul*, an album of extensively overdubbed studio performances in which Lennon, McCartney, and Harrison (as well as Martin) could also be heard playing piano, harmonium, sitar, bouzouki, and other instruments. Not only was *Rubber Soul* too complex in texture to be reproduced in concert—at least not under the conditions prevailing in 1965—but it was meant to be experienced not as a collection of fourteen individual and free-standing songs but as something considerably more ambitious. "For the first time," Martin explained, "we began to think of albums as art on their own, as complete entities."

Needless to say, this approach to album-making did not begin with the Beatles. Other jazz and pop musicians had already experimented with thematically unified "concept albums," most notably Frank Sinatra in *Only the Lonely* (which he recorded for Capitol, the Beatles' American label, in 1958). In addition, a number of classical performers and record producers, including Glenn Gould and John Culshaw, had started to make studio recordings that were not meant to be literal "records" of live performances. As I have written elsewhere:

> Such famous albums as Glenn Gould's 1955 recording of the Bach Goldberg Variations, Frank Sinatra's *Only the Lonely*, Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*, or the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* are not attempts to simulate live performances. They are, rather, unique experiences existing *only* on record, and the record itself, not the music or the performance, is the art object.[8]

After *Rubber Soul*, the Beatles stopped performing in public and thereafter devoted themselves exclusively to the making of just such recordings. The most artistically successful was *Revolver* (1966), in which the playing of the classical horn soloist Alan Civil and the string and brass sections heard on "Eleanor Rigby" and "Got to Get You Into My Life" are combined with a dazzlingly varied assortment of studio-crafted effects. *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), *The Beatles* (1968, popularly known as the "white album"), and *Abbey Road* (1969) would make more extensive use of overdubbing and additional instruments, as did singles like "Penny Lane" and "All You Need Is Love" (both released in 1967). But it is on *Revolver*, the best of their thirteen albums, that the Beatles can be heard at their most disciplined and musically impressive.

It is, I suspect, no accident that after 1970, none of the four Beatles would write any songs or make any recordings comparable in quality to the ones they made as a group. Together, their musical limitations had been offset by the creative synergy of their collaboration (as well as by the discreet guidance of George Martin, their producer-mentor). When they began to work independently, the limitations overwhelmed them, and they spent the rest of their lives struggling in vain to rival the achievements of their youth.

The historical significance of these achievements, however, cannot be overstated. After the Beatles, rock-and-roll would never be the same. What started out as a stripped-down, popularized blending of country music and rhythm-and-blues intended for consumption by middle-class teenagers evolved into a new musical dialect in which it was possible to make statements complex and thoughtful enough to seize and hold the attention of adult listeners.

This is not to say that rock in general has always repaid such close attention. Unlike jazz, which developed with great speed from a purely functional accompaniment of social dancing into a full-fledged art music of the highest possible seriousness, most rock has remained as commercial as the simplest-minded pop music of the pre-rock era. But between the late 60's, when rock became the *lingua franca* of the baby boomers, and the late 90's, when the disintegration of the common culture brought its stylistic hegemony to an end, the best rock groups had much to offer the serious music lover.

Without the Beatles, this might well not have been the case. Neither virtuoso instrumentalists nor pure songwriters, they instead explored the possibilities of the hybrid art of the record album as art object more successfully than any other popular musicians of their generation. For this—and for the beauty of their best music—they will be remembered.

[8] "Why Listening Will Never Be the Same" (Commentary, September 2002), reprinted in *A Terry Teachout Reader* (Yale, 2004) as part of the longer essay, "Life After Records."

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feature

The New, A-Maze-ing *Approach to* MATH

A Mathematician with a Child Learns Some Politics

I am not a mathematics teacher, but I have a degree in mathematics and an intense interest in how the subject is taught. When I retire, I would like to teach math, which is why I started tutoring high school students in my spare time three years ago. My first student was a 9th grader having difficulty with geometry. He stated his problem succinctly: "I don't know how to do proofs." Confronted with what I thought could be a common problem, I was still unaware that what I was really seeing was a national crisis in mathematics education.

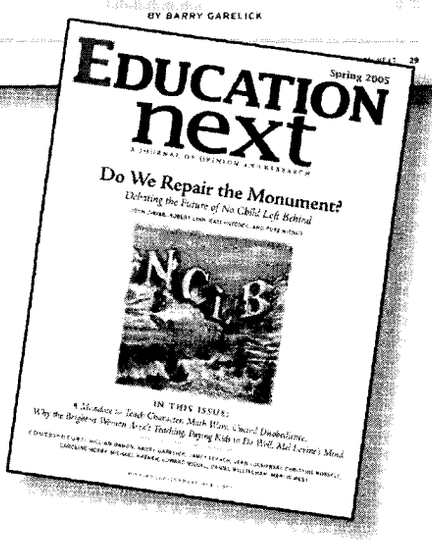
Here's some of what I would soon learn:

—Only 55 percent of 8th graders taking the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam correctly answered the question, "How many pieces of string will you have if you divide ¾ yard of string into pieces each ¼ yard long?"

—In an international math test taken by students worldwide in 1995 (the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, or TIMSS), U.S. student math proficiency for 8th graders fell below the international average (28th out of 41 countries). For 12th grade, U.S. math performance was among the lowest (18th of the 21 countries participating).

—In 1989 the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) published its *Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics*—an extensive set of mathematics standards for grades K–12 which de-emphasized memorization of number facts, the learning of proofs, and algebraic skills, but encouraged the use of calculators and "discovery learning."

BY BARRY GARELICK



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Books in Review

Baghdad Bob

The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East

by Robert Fisk

Knopf. 1,107 pp. $40.00

Reviewed by
Efraim Karsh

NO FOREIGN journalist is more closely identified with the Middle East than the British writer Robert Fisk. Through 30 years of reporting from his base in Beirut, first for the London *Times* and now for the London *Independent*, Fisk has built a reputation not only as an intrepid war correspondent but as a foremost commentator on the volatile region. His eye for sensational detail and his readiness to cover the hottest flashpoints have won him worldwide publicity and numerous professional awards.

None of this has made Fisk notably modest, as the thousand-page heft of his latest book suggests. The ostensible subject of *The Great War for Civilisation* is the turbulent period during which Fisk has been stationed in the Middle East, from the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the late 1970's to the two U.S.-led wars in Iraq and, above all, the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict. But the grand unifying theme is Fisk himself. As he writes in his preface, reminiscing about his initial posting with the *Times* in 1976: "I was twenty-nine, and I was being offered the Middle East. I wondered how King Faisal felt when he was 'offered' Iraq or how his brother Abdullah reacted to Winston Churchill's 'offer' of Transjordan."

That Fisk would so readily identify himself with the region's Arab autocrats is no accident. It is an apt if inadvertent metaphor, suggesting at once not only his manner as a writer but the opinions that have long infected his all-too-influential work.

THE ROLE of journalists, Fisk writes in his opening pages, is to be "the first impartial witnesses to history." "If we have any reason for our existence, the least must be our ability to report history as it happens so that no one can say: 'We didn't know—no one told us.'"

For Fisk, this burden of "impartiality" has led in a distinctive direction. His book, like his journalism, draws on the broad historical narrative that has now become standard in Western universities. In this view, culpability for the Middle East's endemic malaise rests squarely on the West itself, beginning with the European powers that, after World War I, carved from the remains of the Ottoman empire a series of makeshift states. As Fisk puts it:

> [I]t was to take my father's generation just 23 months to create these artificial borders. . . . We victors promised independence to the Arabs and support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Promises are meant to be kept. And so those promises . . . were betrayed, and the millions of Arabs and Jews of the Middle East are now condemned to live with the results.

Having been duped by the Europeans into a revolt against their Ottoman suzerain, Arab nationalists, in

EFRAIM KARSH's Islamic Imperialism: A History *will be published by Yale University Press in April.*

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Fisk's telling, could never accept the distorted political order that arose in the aftermath of the Great War.

Still less could they accept its most dire eventual consequence: the establishment in 1948 of the state of Israel. As Fisk writes, "Why did the Palestinians have to bear the fate of Britain's World War I promise to a people whose ancestors lived on their land two thousand years before?" As for the defeat of the Palestinian and Arab attempt to destroy the Jewish state at its birth, that, Fisk argues, was little more than a reverse exercise in ethnic cleansing, at the Arabs' expense.

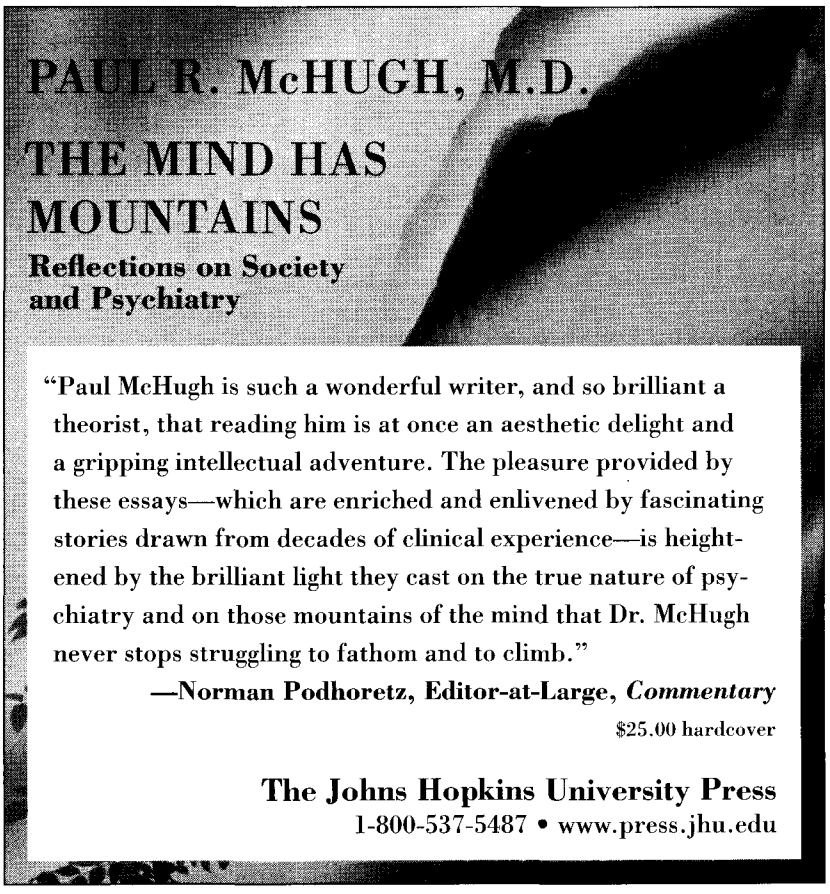
The passage of time has only magnified this injustice, the story of which occupies a lion's share of the pages and constitutes the true emotional core of *The Great War for Civilisation*. The Palestinians, as Fisk tells it, now suffer not only from the Jews but from a mercenary indigenous leadership willing to sign away their historic claims. Typical of his reporting in this regard is his account of the Palestinian response to the "declaration of principles" (DOP) that marked the formal beginning of the Oslo negotiations in 1993. As dignitaries congregated on the White House lawn for the historic signing ceremony, Fisk traveled to the West Bank, where he found that "No one . . . spoke in favor of Arafat's acceptance of an 'interim' solution.'" As one Palestinian told him, "If you are a small collaborator, the Israelis will help you in a little way. . . . But if you are a big collaborator like Arafat, they may let you visit Jerusalem."

When it comes to the Israelis themselves, Fisk finds it difficult to catalog the full range of their purported crimes—but he tries. One episode dwelled upon in painstaking detail is the 1994 murder of 29 Palestinians in Hebron by the Jewish zealot Baruch Goldstein. What others at the time saw as the act of a deranged individual emerges in his account as a terrorist attack instigated by Israel itself. For him, to describe the event as a "terrible tragedy" and a "gross act of murder," as did former President Bill Clinton, is to resort to "weasel phrases."

Nor can Fisk resist rehearsing the particulars of another favorite episode of supposed Israeli perfidy, the Israel Defense Forces' anti-terror campaign in the towns and refugee camps of the West Bank in April 2002, at the height of the second *intifada*. Dedicating four full pages to events in Jenin, where 38 Palestinian combatants and 14 civilians were killed during heavy fighting (fighting that also took the lives of 23 Israeli soldiers), Fisk struggles to find the correct terms for the alleged horrors: "How big does a massacre have to be before it qualifies as a genocide? How many dead before a genocide becomes a holocaust?"

At every turn, according to Fisk, and whether it is the Palestinians or other Arab and Muslim populations at issue, the West applies to the Middle East a gross double standard. Stigmatizing Palestinians and others as terrorists, we explain away the far more barbaric acts of Israel and the United States. The word "terrorism," he writes, "has become a plague on our vocabulary." It is "the excuse and reason and moral permit for state-sponsored violence—*our* violence—which is now used on the innocent of the Middle East ever more outrageously and promiscuously."

FISK'S INDICTMENT is a familiar one, at least for anyone who has attended to Arab propaganda over the years or, more recently, to the sloganeering of the anti-Israel Left. But he does not wish to be seen as just another partisan in the debate. As the ostentatious bulk of his current book attests, Fisk wants to be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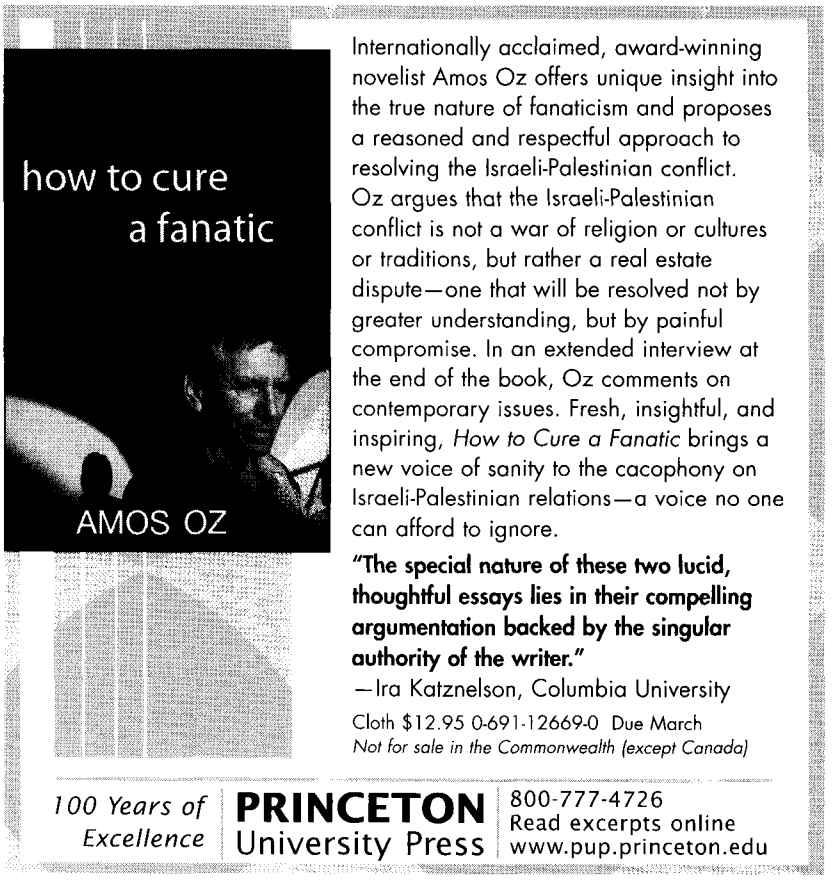
taken seriously, both as a journalist and as a writer with wider intellectual and historiographical ambitions. In this, he falls dismally—if predictably—short.

First there is the problem of simple accuracy. It is difficult to turn a page of *The Great War for Civilisation* without encountering some basic error. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, not, as Fisk has it, in Jerusalem. The Caliph Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, was murdered in the year 661, not in the 8th century. Emir Abdallah became king of Transjordan in 1946, not 1921, and both he and his younger brother, King Faisal I of Iraq, hailed not from a "Gulf tribe" but rather from the Hashemites on the other side of the Arabian peninsula. The Iraqi monarchy was overthrown in 1958, not 1962; Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the mufti of Jerusalem, was appointed by the British authorities, not elected; Ayatollah Khomeini transferred his exile from Turkey to the holy Shiite city of Najaf not during Saddam Hussein's rule but fourteen years before Saddam seized power. Security Council resolution 242 was passed in November 1967, not 1968; Anwar Sadat of Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, not 1977, and was assassinated in October 1981, not 1979. Yitzhak Rabin was minister of defense, not prime minister, during the first Palestinian *intifada*, and al Qaeda was established not in 1998 but a decade earlier. And so on and so forth.

The deeper problem with Fisk's work is not the sort of thing that can be fixed by acquiring a better research assistant or fact-checking apparatus. Facts must be placed in their proper context, after all, and this demands a degree of good faith that Fisk utterly lacks. Indeed, so blatant and thoroughgoing are his ideological prejudices that his very name has entered the lexicon of the Internet as a synonym for systematic bias. Among the online commentators known as bloggers, the verb "to fisk" has come to mean a point-by-point rebuttal of an egregiously slanted piece of writing—like, classically, a Fisk dispatch from the Middle East.

The precise angle of his tilt has been confirmed by Osama bin Laden himself, who, in a videotaped message on the eve of the 2004 presidential election in the U.S., commended Fisk by name for his incisive and "neutral" reporting. On Planet Fisk, there are bad guys and there are victims, and the victims—the Arabs—can do no wrong, at least none for which they are ultimately responsible. Thus, one comes away from his current book hardly realizing that Lebanon was under a repressive Syrian occupation for most of the 30 years that Fisk has made his home there. The only hint arrives three pages before book's end, when he notes the prompt withdrawal of Syrian forces following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a crime in which Damascus was deeply complicit.

Even positive news from the Arab world gets twisted to fit the needs of Fisk's grand narrative. Consider the "declaration of principles" that launched the Oslo process. Fisk, who considered the negotiations an act of betrayal by Arafat, pretends that this was also the view among average Palestinians, as we have seen. But in the West Bank and Gaza, the DOP generated a huge wave of euphoria. According to public-opinion polls in September 1993, 65 percent of the residents of the territories supported the peace process, with 57 percent amenable to revising the Palestinian Covenant's call for the destruction of Israel. Even a few years later, after the turbulent Netanyahu era, support for the peace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process among Palestinians remained as high as 60 percent.

As for the long record of Palestinian terrorism, Fisk has his own bag of "weasel phrases" to avoid calling it by its proper name. He describes as mere "deaths" the cold-blooded murder of eleven Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, as if they died of physical overexertion. The massacre of 26 passengers at Tel Aviv airport that same year comes into view as "a Palestinian-inspired shooting." Like the extremists with whom he sympathizes, Fisk equates the intentional targeting of civilians by Palestinian terrorists with the inadvertent deaths caused by Israeli acts of self-defense or, in the case of Baruch Goldstein, with the rampage of a lone fanatic. In point of fact, Israel treated the Hebron massacre as an act of terrorism, and, though Goldstein acted without any organizational or operational support, banned the far-Right Kach group of which he was a member.

Such is the general standard Fisk applies as an "impartial witness to history." Massacres of innocent civilians by Arab and Islamic militants throughout the world—from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv to Manhattan, Bali, and Baghdad—are for him not acts of terrorism but rather the understandable and altogether patriotic response of people brutalized by colonial occupation. The curious effect of this effort to absolve Middle Easterners of any blame or responsibility for their region's problems, or their own deeds, is to make Fisk guilty of the sin for which he endlessly berates the West; he patronizes his subjects in the worst tradition of the "white man's burden."

Though Fisk compares himself to Arab kings at the start of his book, he emerges, ultimately, much more like Lawrence of Arabia, who concluded that the Arabs were "a limited, narrow-minded people," incapable of decent behavior because their "inert intellect lay fallow in incurious resignation." As the eminent Orientalist Bernard Lewis likes to joke, possessing such fundamentally racist attitudes is what it means today to be "pro-Arab."

Back in the USSR

The Cold War:
A New History

by John Lewis Gaddis

Penguin. 352 pp. $27.95

Reviewed by
Richard Pipes

THE CONFLICT known since 1945 as the "cold war" was one of those titanic struggles between two great powers striving for hegemony that date back to the Greek-Persian confrontation in the 5th century B.C.E. and that recurred periodically thereafter. Notable instances included the Peloponnesian war, Rome's struggles with Carthage three centuries later, the clashes of Christian Europe with Islam, the Hundred-Years war between England and France, and so on until modern times. Invariably, these conflicts took the form of armed clashes that, thanks to advances in weapons technology, claimed ever more victims.

The invention of nuclear weapons in the mid-20th century threatened to escalate the number of such victims exponentially and possibly extinguish all life on earth. Paradoxically, however, it had the opposite effect, eliminating armed conflict as a way of resolving global conflicts. For this, the only such occurrence in human history, a great deal of credit must go to the leadership of the United States, which for a long time enjoyed an actual or virtual monopoly on these weapons but refrained from using them. (In 1959, on the eve of the Cuban missile crisis, the Soviet Union had only six operational strategic missiles in its arsenal.)

This fact is one among many to be found in *The Cold War: A New History*. John Lewis Gaddis, a professor at Yale, has made an academic specialty of the U.S.-Soviet conflict. Among his half-dozen books on the subject, the most recent before this latest title, and the most ambitious, was *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (1997), which brought the story down to 1962 and, along the way, deflated the revisionist *idée fixe* that the U.S. was as much to blame for the conflict as the Soviet Union. The present book, which seems to have originated in a course given by Gaddis at Yale, carries the narrative to the end—that is, to the dissolution of the USSR that brought to a close the contest the USSR had itself started.

FOR THE cold war really began with the founding of the Soviet state in late 1917. In seizing power in Russia, Lenin and his associates aimed not at transforming their country into a model Communist state but at using it as a springboard for unleashing a global revolution: a social revolution in the West, an anti-colonialist one elsewhere. The Bolsheviks (with the exception of Stalin) were convinced that "revolution in one country" was unsustainable—in part because the Russian "proletariat," of which they fancied themselves the representatives, would drown in the sea of a hostile "petty bourgeois" peasantry and in part because the "capitalist" states, then at war with each other in Europe, would almost certainly bury their differences and attack the Soviet homeland.

Thus, from their first day in power, the Russian Communists issued calls to the world's "masses" to rise against their exploiters. These appeals evoked little response, and

RICHARD PIPES *is Baird professor of history, emeritus, at Harvard and the author, most recently, of* Russian Conservatism and Its Rivals *(Yale).*

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the one attempt (in Poland in 1920) to back them with military force ended in disaster. Nevertheless, throughout the interwar period, Moscow continued scheming to expand its influence through various means, and especially by promoting discord among its "capitalist" enemies. This was the task assigned to the Communist International, founded in 1919, the principal instrument of the early cold war.

The Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939, which unleashed World War II, marked the culmination of this process. But any narrative of the cold war that omits the prior, interwar period is bound to be deprived of historical depth—and Gaddis's, which begins in the mid-1940's with the end of World War II, is unfortunately no exception. Although he faithfully re-creates the major episodes and various flashpoints of the next 45 years, the conflict as he depicts it can too often assume the character of an ordinary struggle for power, rather than the contest between two very different ways of life that the cold war represented.

Gaddis, does, however, bring consummate skill to telling the political story. The great virtue of this book lies in showing the conflict's immense complexity, for this was a battle involving not simply two rivals but all sorts of allies on either side (some of whom were able to manipulate the great powers to a surprising extent), and it produced a multitude of problems tangential to the main conflict.

Particularly impressive is Gaddis's grasp of the way in which historical events are shaped by a combination of accident and inevitability, by individuals as well as by forces beyond their control. This quality is especially evident in his account of the Soviet Union's collapse, which is told with dramatic force and from which it emerges that none of the protagonists quite knew what he was doing. Gaddis is also convincing in demonstrating the difficulties faced by the United States in fighting, within the confines of its laws and traditions, an undeclared war against a rival not so constrained.

In his scrupulous determination to appear fair and non-judgmental, Gaddis refuses to convey the amoral viciousness of the Communist side. This is in part the consequence of the more general flaw I pointed out earlier, namely, the failure to take cognizance of the roots of the conflict in the pre-World War II history of Soviet Communism.

Still, these and other shortcomings having been noted—although the book closes with 32 pages of references and a 16-page bibliography, not a single source is cited in a foreign language—*The Cold War* can be recommended as a succinct and authoritative account of what is unquestionably a unique event in the annals of humanity: a hegemonic struggle that ended without bloodshed when the party that began it quietly folded its tent and vanished from the historical stage.

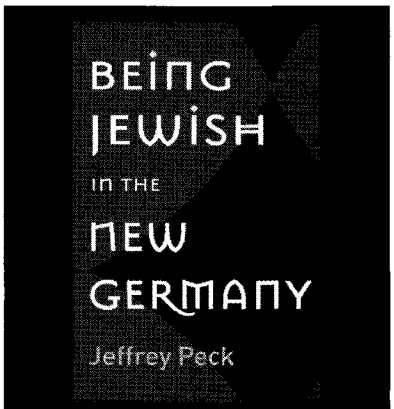
Laughing Matters

Dean and Me (A Love Story)
by Jerry Lewis and James Kaplan
Doubleday. 340 pp. $26.95

Reviewed by
Dan Seligman

An article in the *New York Times* last year posited that civilized people no longer tell jokes. Surely there is something to this. I personally have not heard a joke worth repeating in over a decade, and the last one I remember liking—

Dan Seligman, *a contributing editor of* Forbes, *reviewed* The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth *by Benjamin Friedman in our December 2005 issue.*



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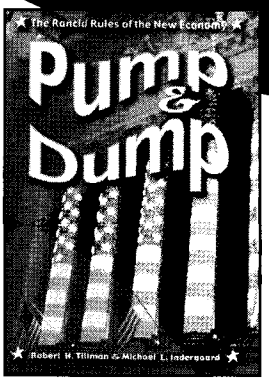

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> A Jew and a Scotsman are having dinner. The waiter brings the bill, and the Scotsman says, "Here, I'll take that." Headline in the next day's paper: JEWISH VENTRILOQUIST FOUND MURDERED IN ALLEY.

—was being told by people who wanted to argue over whether or not it was anti-Semitic, as alleged in a complaint on the humor website of Stanford University, and if so, and maybe even if not, whether Stanford should close down the site. These days, if you Google "Jewish ventriloquist," you will find that the joke is still famous not for being funny but for being off-limits in the taste department.

Has something serious happened to American humor? According to a recent column in the *Wall Street Journal*, the particular variant known as standup comedy has been in a "funk" for over a decade. The big guns of the past, certainly, have not been replaced. Not only are there no new Richard Pryors or Steve Martins, there are no modern counterparts of such older geniuses as Sid Caesar, Milton Berle, or Red Skelton, to cite a modest sample of what once was out there.

Jerry Seinfeld has genuine wit and certainly qualifies as a big gun, but even at his best, he is serving up ironies and incongruities and generating mere chuckles. Jackie Mason, a throwback, is an exception that proves the rule. Never again, it appears, will there be an act like Martin and Lewis, on my scorecard the all-time world champions of explosive laughter production. (I saw them live three times: twice at the Copacabana in New York, once at Chez Paree in Chicago.)

Jerry Lewis's memoir is thus an invitation to explore a lost world—the world he and Dean Martin were on top of from 1946 to 1956. As expertly rendered by James Kaplan of the *New Yorker* (who did a profile of Lewis in 2000), the story is organized somewhat chronologically but with many flashbacks and thematic asides, one recurrent theme being the inescapable presence of the mob in the nightclub/casino business. In this connection, Lewis confesses—or possibly boasts—that he knew and mostly liked Bugsy Siegel in Las Vegas, the Fischetti brothers, Tony Accardo, and Sam Giancana in Chicago, and Frank Costello and Lucky Luciano in New York. His verdict: "I found the great majority of these guys to be men of their word, far less hypocritical about their businesses than most of the politicians of the day."

UNTIL THEY started performing together, Martin and Lewis were showbiz losers. Both were high-school dropouts who had wives and children and were going nowhere. When they first met in March 1945, the former Dino Crocetti was a refugee from blue-collar Steubenville, Ohio with a nonpaying job crooning for WMCA radio in New York, which made the arrangement worthwhile by arranging for him to live rent-free at the Belmont Plaza hotel. The former Joseph Levitch, from Irvington, New Jersey, was trying to get on with a pathetic act in which he made funny faces and wore funny clothes while lip-synching to phonograph records.

But there came a time when both acts were booked into the Havana Madrid, a third-tier New York nightclub on Broadway near 50th Street, and it was 3:00 AM, with more waiters than customers in the place, and Lewis decided on an impulse to come onstage and clown around crazily while Martin was trying to sing. For a fateful two seconds, it was an open question whether Martin would react angrily or go along with the gag. Luckily, he opted to go along.

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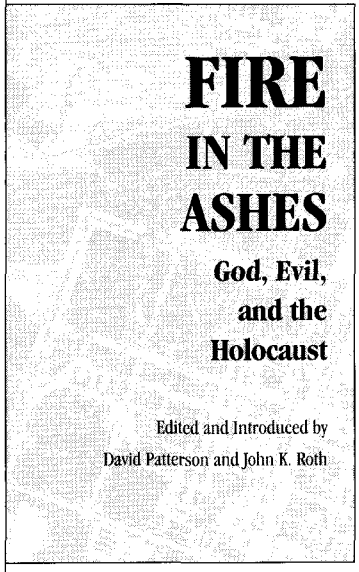

FIRE IN THE ASHES
God, Evil, and the Holocaust
Edited by David Patterson
and John K. Roth

Writing in a format that creates the feel of dialogue, Christian and Jewish scholars rethink theodicy—typically understood as the vindication of divine justice in the face of evil—following the Holocaust and its aftermath. In addition to Patterson and Roth, the contributors are Margaret Brearley, Britta Frede-Wenger, Leonard Grob, Peter J. Haas, Hannah Holtschneider, Henry F. Knight, Juergen Manenmann, Rochelle L. Millen, and Didier Polleyfet.

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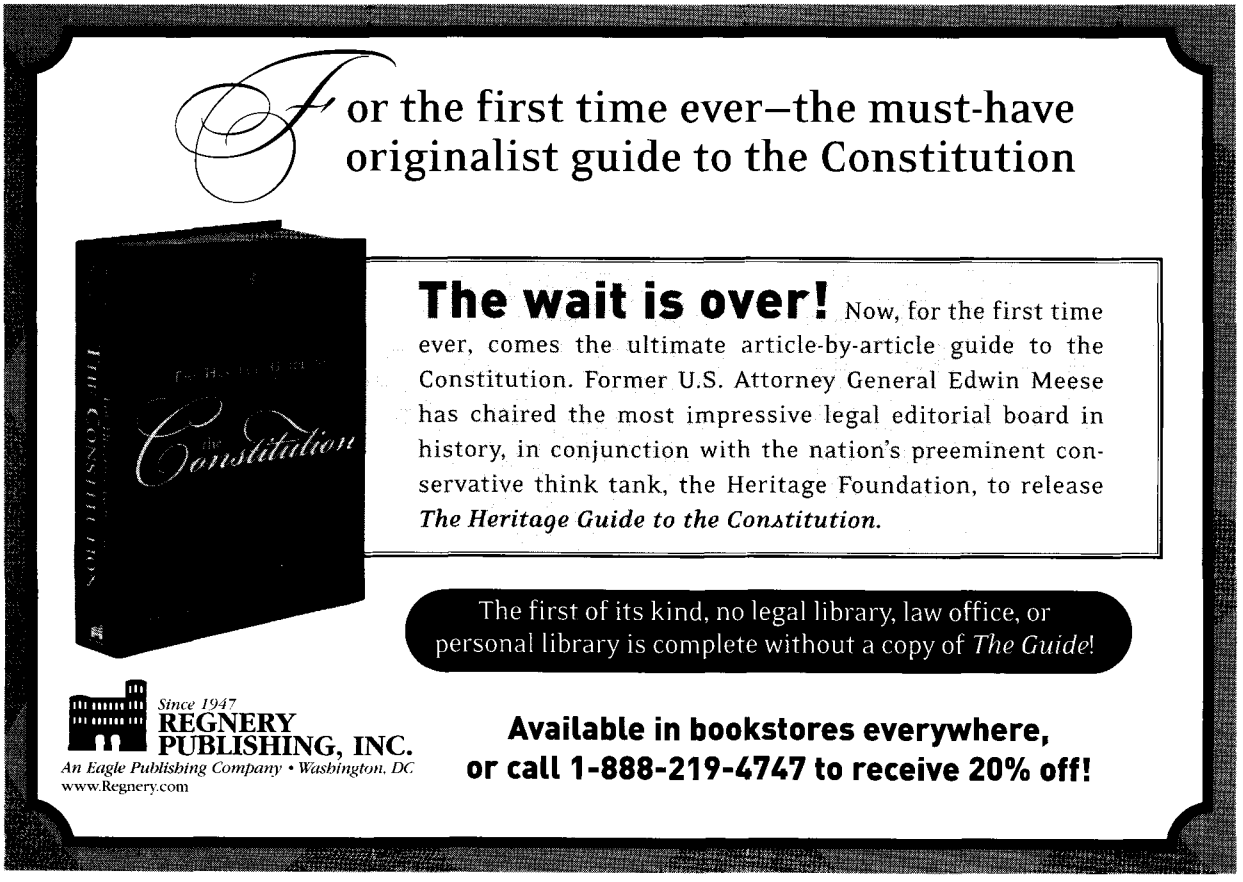
Even more luckily, he turned out to be funny—arguably funnier than Lewis. In the high-energy act that evolved, the chemistry was perfect. Martin was smooth and unflappable, Lewis maniacal and nonsensical, always playing what he called a *putz*. They worked without a script, and it all depended on mile-a-minute improvisation, physical and verbal, with no self-censorship about sex, race, ethnicity, or religion, and no quarter given to ringside customers or busboys trying to preserve the crockery. In a line here that Lewis may have gotten from his psychoanalyst, their act was "the explosion of the show-business id."

A few weeks after that night on Broadway, the two were hired as a team by the 500 Club in Atlantic City, a joint several blocks off the boardwalk with 240 seats for the entertainment and an adjacent illegal casino. Each of them was making $150 for a week's work. On their first night, they played to a crowd of 24. On the second night, it was 200, and the crowd kept them onstage for more than two hours. On the third night, long lines were trying to get into the 500 Club, and on the afternoon of the fourth day, the management was offering $750 a week and demanding four more weeks.

Those figures grew exponentially. A couple of years later, they were making $400,000 a week on a schedule that featured four daytime shows at the Roxy Theater in New York, followed by the dinner show at the Riviera nightclub in Fort Lee, New Jersey, then back to the Roxy for the 11:20 PM show, then again to the Riviera for the 1:15 AM show, with police escorts for all four crossings of the George Washington bridge. On another occasion, they received $100,000 for a single evening performance at Grossinger's in the Catskills. You can multiply all those figures by about eight to get the current dollar equivalents.

If *Dean and Me* has a villain, it is Hal Wallis, the Hollywood producer, who early on signed the pair to a long-term movie contract. This led to an arresting discovery: on top of their night-club gigs, they were capable of turning out two or three movies a year that made money and required no thinking. The movies were supremely unfunny, and in *Dean and Me* Lewis maintains that he kept trying to do something better. But Wallis was adamant: "Fellows, look. A Martin and Lewis picture costs a half-million, and it's guaranteed to make three million with a simple formula: Jerry's an idiot, Dean is a straight leading man who sings a couple of songs and gets the girl. That's it, don't f— with it."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HUGE CHUNKS of *Dean and Me* are devoted to explaining and interpreting the Martin-Lewis breakup in 1956. It was initiated mainly by Martin, and Lewis appears to believe that it happened mainly because his partner became increasingly irritated by the reviews identifying him, Lewis, as the guiding genius of the act. Not considered in the book is the possibility that working with Jerry Lewis for more than a decade could be both exhausting and—as each became wealthier—finally unnecessary.

A great act was lost when the two men split up, but each of them had new options. The Jerry Lewis movies, dumb beyond belief as ever, remained highly profitable. Dean Martin, however, made a few quite good movies, beginning with *The Young Lions* (1958), a critical and financial success in which he effortlessly held his own playing alongside Marlon Brando and Montgomery Clift. Until his death in 1995, Martin kept branching out. During the last two decades, he lived mostly in Las Vegas, joining Sammy Davis, Jr., Peter Lawford, Joey Bishop, and other such idealists in Frank Sinatra's Rat Pack, where just fooling around was the main point.

SIMILARLY NOT addressed in *Dean and Me* is the current state of standup comedy. It is possible that Lewis, who will turn eighty in March, does not really know much about this subject: it is somehow hard to envisage him dropping by a comedy club to catch the action these days. I gather from friends who do go (and whose reports are confirmed by the essayist in the *Wall Street Journal*) that some acts are outrageously raunchy, some are constrained by political correctness, and not many rise to the level of an average 1948 borscht-belt professional.

An interesting question is whether this is related to demographics. Big-time comedians were traditionally apt to be Jewish, which seems utterly logical, given that Jews were known for exceptional verbal skills (well documented in the IQ literature) and above-average levels of hostility and/or ethnic anxiety, two rich founts of comedic material. Today, however, you can Google "Chinese comedian" and find hundreds of citations, and even the nurturing sex is out there fighting for laughs. But is anybody even trying to do what Martin and Lewis did 50 years ago?

A question within that question is whether any such act could command a sizable following today. Martin and Lewis were screamingly funny in the 50's, but it is not entirely clear that today's college-educated audiences would be similarly convulsed. Just as the joke is falling out of favor in everyday life,

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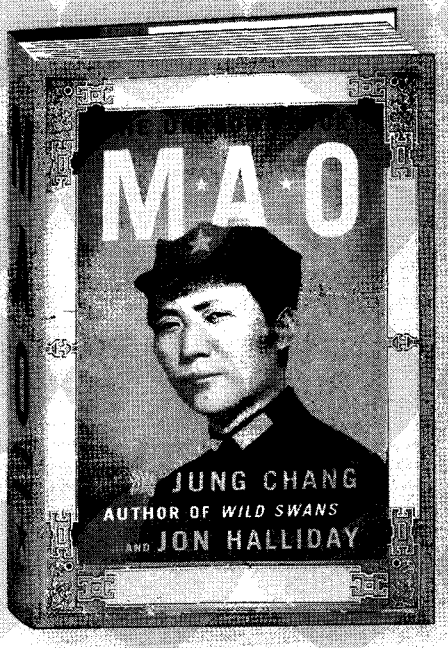

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gags and one-liners and slapstick seem to be increasingly suspect in the comedy clubs.

The issue is what replaces them. One recurrently observes modern comics seeking to lift the intellectual level of their acts and occasionally still managing to be funny (as the Monty Python troupe often was), but all too frequently falling on their faces in an effort to reposition themselves as satirists. As Ogden Nash might have written, Turning satire into shtick,/Is not an easy trick.

We may just have to live with less hilarity in our lives.

Right Turn

The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy

by Murray Friedman

Cambridge. 312 pp. $29.00

Reviewed by
Wilfred M. McClay

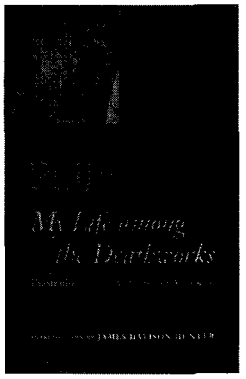
One of the many causes championed by the late Murray Friedman, whose death last May brought to a close a long and fruitful career, was the recovery of a genuine, if largely forgotten, strain of conservatism in the American Jewish past. Given the unwavering commitment to liberalism of most American Jews, a more counter-intuitive proposition would have been hard to find. But Friedman, an accomplished historian who served as mid-Atlantic director for the American Jewish Committee, vice chairman of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, and founding director of the Feinstein Center for American Jewish History at Temple University, was a patient and a hopeful man.

Nor did the goal of excavating an American Jewish conservatism seem any more quixotic to Friedman than Russell Kirk's project a half-century earlier in *The Conservative Mind* (1953). After all, when Kirk's book was launched, conventional wisdom had it that America possessed but one intellectual tradition, namely liberalism, outside of which there was nothing but an uncharted territory of (in Lionel Trilling's sardonic characterization) irritable mental gestures. Kirk provided a plausible historical background for a very different collection of ideas, and a very different intellectual and moral disposition—an American outlook that had been there all along but that lacked the means of identifying itself.

To be sure, *The Neoconservative Revolution* should not be read as Friedman's attempt to produce a Jewish version of Kirk's book. Nor is it yet another redaction of the myth about a small band of Jewish intellectuals taking over the U.S. government. Indeed, Friedman is relatively uninterested in analyzing current neoconservative ideas and influences. His book is instead an effort to demonstrate that Jewish intellectuals, activists, and policy-makers played a significant role in the *formation* of modern American conservatism. He therefore operates on a fairly large canvas, retelling many of the pivotal events in 20th-century American political and intellectual history, especially since World War II, and along the way introducing us to important Jewish players.

There is a good deal more of that retold history here than many readers will want or need, although it does serve a purpose, showing how these thinkers were responding to real-world events and not merely to intellectual or academic fashions. And it is indeed surprising how often Jewish thinkers and activists turn up in the story of modern

Wilfred M. McClay *is the author most recently of* Religion Returns to the Public Square: Faith and Policy in America *(Johns Hopkins).*



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Volume 1
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Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority

Philip Rieff
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Introduction by James Davison Hunter

"*Sacred Order/Social Order: My Life among the Deathworks* is stunning in its originality, breathtaking in its erudition and intellectual range, and astonishing in the brilliance of its insights into our historical moment. It penetrates settled conceptual conventions to open up new ways of thinking about culture, religion, morality, character, identity, social movements, and a pantheon of intellectuals, novelists, poets, and artists. In the discipline of social theory, there is nothing quite like this."—**from the introduction by James Davison Hunter**

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American conservatism. From the articulation of conservative positions on the espionage and McCarthy controversies of the immediate postwar era, to the founding of *National Review* in 1955 and the formation of the Goldwater movement in the Republican party, to the critique of the multiple debacles of the Lindsay years in New York City, to the response to the post-Vietnam crack-up of American foreign policy, and in countless other such moments in the recent past, conservative Jews have not merely popped up but played highly visible and important roles.

Not all of them have been neoconservatives or proto-neoconservatives; some were conservative from the start. But all seem to have coalesced around a perception that the American nation is, by historical standards, an environment extraordinarily favorable to Jews; that it is itself a force for good in the world; and that a regnant liberalism has wrought extreme damage and possibly brought the country to the verge of catastrophe. Neoconservatism itself, as Friedman states, began in "a reaction to the liberal meltdown and the loss of confidence of many Americans," at a time when the nation was afflicted by powerful enemies abroad and a "despairing spirit" within. Its recent emergence into more general public view and parlance needs to be seen against this historical background.

THUS, NO one reading Friedman's book, with its host of interesting and near-forgotten characters, can pretend that "Jewish conservatism" was an oxymoron, even in pre-neoconservative days. That stipulated, however, it must also be said that Friedman's approach provides large historical sweep at the expense of depth, and tends at times to treat the protagonists' Jewishness as a matter of individual and social identity rather than as a factor in their thinking or in their cultural or historical influence. Such an approach may make sense if one is speaking of a Hank Greenberg or Sandy Koufax or other great American Jewish athletes, but not in the case of writers and intellectuals.

Thus, Friedman seldom distinguishes between cases in which the Jewishness of his subjects is incidental and those in which it is absolutely critical, not only determining what they do but imparting something significant to the overall enterprise in which they are involved. This becomes especially frustrating in his treatment of the rise and success of neoconservatism proper, but the problem is evident almost from the very earliest stages of his story.

Describing some of the earliest players, Friedman uses categories like "premature Jewish neoconservative" and "forgotten Jewish godfather" to suggest the ways in which they were formative of, or at least prophetic of, the neoconservatism to come. In the former category are figures like Trilling, Irving Kristol, and Will Herberg; the latter includes Eugene Lyons, Ralph de Toledano, Morrie Ryskind, Frank Chodorov, Milton Friedman, Frank Meyer, Marvin Liebman, and others.

It is fairly clear that a familiar American Jewish pattern—from immigrant ghetto to passionate socialist commitment to post-Stalinist disillusionment—operated in each of these lives. Yet one has to be careful not to see neoconservatism too readily as the end toward which these earlier Jewish conservatives were driving, and thereby to miss its, and their, distinctive qualities. More to the point, Friedman never makes clear how, or how much, their specific life pattern influenced the enterprises with which they were associated. Many Americans rise in the world, or leave their natal world behind; why was this way different?

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just how the Jewishness of Chodorov and Liebman and Meyer affected the things they wrote and did. Can one show anything beyond clichés about Jewish "marginality," something touching on the real structure of Jewish thought and morality? Is it enough to say of Milton Friedman, Murray Rothbard, Ayn Rand, and other Jewish free-market advocates that they were steeped in "the ever-present Jewish distrust of authority and government" when such distrust is as all-American as beer and pretzels? And besides, how does one square this with the "ever-present" Jewish attraction to socialism and activist progressivism in government?

Other questions obtrude. Yes, there was a surprising number of Jews in high posts on the staff of the *National Review* even in its earliest days—but what, specifically, did this do to color the magazine's outlook? Their presence may have helped in small ways to strengthen the magazine's resolve to purge the Right of its anti-Semitic elements, but is that all? We get only the most scattered and undeveloped hints of answers to such questions.

In fairness, the confusion is not merely Friedman's; it reflects the intrinsic difficulty of the subject. The modifier "Jewish" almost always stands in need of further clarification. And these days, now that the word "neocon" has become an equal-opportunity slur, employed glibly by everyone from addled rock stars and actors to conservative ideological rivals to respected foreign-policy analysts to thinly veiled anti-Semites (some of whom may be the same people), the confusion seems all but permanent.

Nor is it clear whether and to what extent neoconservatism should be understood as a Jewish phenomenon. On the one hand, it would be inconceivable to describe it without pointing out that Jewish intellectuals and Jewish publications—notably Commentary itself—gave the movement much of its momentum and its specific flavor, as they have done for the whole of New York intellectual life.* Yet as Friedman himself shows, it would be equally inconceivable to describe neoconservatism without reference to such non-Jewish figures as Daniel Patrick Moynihan, James Q. Wilson, Peter Berger, Richard John Neuhaus, and others who have been far from incidental players in its formation and growth.

The more Friedman is forced to take account of such figures, the more his account of the intellectual core of neoconservatism begins to lose its specifically Jewish color and to look like a more general form of chastened liberalism, or post-liberalism—if one with an especially powerful appeal to certain Jews because of the ubiquity of liberalism in American Jewish culture. In that sense, it may be parallel to other, larger movements of modernity that it partly (but only partly) rejects—movements with which Jews are importantly (and rightly) identified, but which it is dead wrong to describe as specifically Jewish.

In short, one reads Murray Friedman's book with a mixture of fascination at the richness and variety of the parade and frustration at the somewhat haphazard and unprocessed quality of his descriptions of it. But if Friedman's book is both indispensable and flawed, it will surely provide inspiration for others. One strand that future writers might pick up on, and about which Friedman may have made too little, is the centrality of the "conversion experience" in neoconservatism, one

* In early 2004 Friedman organized a symposium in New York on the role of Commentary, and subsequently edited a fascinating volume of papers from the event: *Commentary in American Life*, Temple University Press, 232 pp., $64.95 ($22.95 paper).

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that is really a deconversion from secular and progressive orthodoxy.

Most accounts of neoconservatism, particularly those that seek to distinguish it from "paleoconservatism," tend to emphasize its acceptance of certain features of liberalism, including the basic structures of the welfare state. That is fair enough; but there is another and nearly opposite distinguishing feature. Nearly all neoconservatives, with the possible exception of the younger ones, have had a painful experience of "breaking ranks" (to borrow the title of Norman Podhoretz's 1979 book) in their intellectual development, a revolt against powerful tribal norms, so to speak, that has often proved extraordinarily costly in terms of ruptured relationships, lost professional opportunities, and personal isolation.

There is nothing exclusively Jewish about this experience, either. But for individual Jews, especially those still likely to perceive themselves as marginal in American culture, such a revolt could not help being especially daunting. It meant challenging not only the status quo within the safe havens of academia, where many had congregated, but also the near-universal assumptions of American Jewish life itself, assumptions that had come to be seen, however wrongly, as the essence of Jewish identity.

Even the espousal of anti-Communism, not to mention an openly favorable view of capitalism, carried a special price for Jews, given the intensity with which the socialist ideal was exalted in American Jewish thought. So, too, given the strong American Jewish identification with the cause of civil rights, did the willingness to break from liberal ranks on issues of race. And so did the willingness to make common cause with conservative Christians in promoting a post-secular, post-separationist ethos that to secular liberal Jews has seemed nothing short of madness. Such conclusions have not been arrived at easily, and the existential weight entailed in acting on one's "second thoughts" is a crucial part of the story.

If there is anything Friedman's book demonstrates conclusively, it is the impossibility at this point of writing a definitive history of the neoconservative disposition. That is, in part, because it is still so visibly in motion. But as is true of so many characteristically American phenomena, it also defies simple categories of cultural analysis. Indeed, the difficulty of either completely affirming or completely denying the specifically Jewish character of neoconservatism may turn out to be one of its greatest assets—and another sign of its thoroughgoing Americanness.

Embedded

A Writer at War:
Vasily Grossman with the
Red Army, 1941-1945

edited by Antony Beevor
and Luba Vinogradova

Pantheon. 400 pp. $27.50

Reviewed by
David Pryce-Jones

THERE ARE writers who seem consumed by the times they live in, and Vasily Grossman, the great Russian novelist and war correspondent, was one of them. Born in 1905 in the provincial Ukrainian town of Berdichev, he was the child of assimilated and secularized Jews. His parents often traveled abroad, and like other members of the family might well have settled in Europe or America. As a Soviet subject, he was instead doomed to the experience of Stalinism and Nazism.

Photographs show Grossman as earnest and ungainly, bespectacled, the very type of a sedentary intellectual. Always somewhat naïve, and apparently never a party member himself, he nevertheless wrote the sort of novels that a Communist was expected to write between the two world wars. Even so, however, he was interrogated for suspected "Trotskyite" links in 1938, and could well have ended as a victim of the Great Terror.

When Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Grossman immediately volunteered. Rejected on physical grounds for military service, he became a special correspondent for *Krasnaya Zvezda* ("Red Star"), a military magazine with a huge readership. His editor, General Ortenberg, a party man, considered Grossman to be "utterly civilian by nature [without] commanding intonations in his voice," but also said of him: "He knew about people's souls."

Hardly ever out of the front lines, Grossman often skirted death as he covered the Red Army in its initial retreat and later recovery; in particular he was present throughout the months of the battle of Stalingrad. He must have been tougher than he appeared, in fact extraordinarily fearless: as recorded in *A Writer at War*, he once crossed a broken bridge over the Vistula by climbing up a rope attached to a ladder, with a suitcase in one hand. So well did his belief in the spirit of the soldiers fighting for Mother Russia coincide with Stalin's expedient nationalism that Grossman became a household name.

Grossman was with the Red Army soldiers who liberated the Nazi extermination camps of Majdanek and Treblinka. In Berdichev, he discovered that his mother had been murdered along with some 20,000 other Jews there. The shock of these events—and guilt over having abandoned his mother to her fate—overshadowed the rest of his life.

After the war, under the auspices of the official Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, Grossman collaborated with Ilya Ehrenburg (the writer who for decades navigated all the shoals of Stalinist policy) in a collection of doc-

DAVID PRYCE-JONES, *the British novelist and political analyst, is a senior editor of* National Review *and the author of, among other works,* The Strange Death of the Soviet Empire.

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uments and eyewitness accounts of the mass murder of the Jews, whose title was to be *The Black Book*. Stalin's anti-Semitism, the violent dissolution of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, and post-war paranoia and terror generated by the so-called Doctors' Plot blocked all prospect of publication. Decades were to pass before *The Black Book* appeared, and then only in English and French, not Russian.

Ilya Ehrenburg once said that Stalin was Grossman's most devoted reader, but on another occasion that Stalin hated him. What is almost certain is that only Stalin's timely death in 1953 saved Grossman from the gulag or worse. In its cruel and random way, the Soviet experiment had first promoted and then crushed him.

His response was to spend the next years writing *Life and Fate*, a huge masterpiece of a war novel, with Tolstoyan echoes and ambitions, based on everything he had lived through. His hero, Jewish like himself, refuses to participate in the odious ideological process of denunciation and confession demanded by the party, instead standing up both for moral and intellectual honesty and for himself as a Jew. Ironically, a fictionalized telephone call from none other than Stalin brings an end to the hero's persecution.

In one of this novel's most brilliant scenes, a Nazi camp commandant and a captured old Bolshevik debate the totalitarianism common to them both. One of the very first to depict Communism and Nazism as mirror images, Grossman was also able to make, in *Life and Fate*, the prediction that eventually proved true in both cases: "A totalitarian state that renounces violence will perish." Risking his own life, he wrote as well that Stalin was to raise over the heads of the Jews "the very sword of annihilation he had wrested from the hands of Hitler."

In another unforgettable scene, Gestapo agents, after surrendering to the Red Army at Stalingrad, are compelled to carry their dead victims out of a building in front of horrified and vengeful Russians. Among the corpses is a young girl with blond hair. An elderly Russian woman rushes forward crying, "My child!," but then, inexplicably, thrusts a piece of bread into the hand of one of the defeated Germans. Grossman's guiding idea is that impulsive kindness is all that is needed for redemption.

In *Life and Fate*, Grossman had found himself as a free human being and a Jew. But only his political naiveté can account for the fact that, in 1960, he presented the work for publication. The KGB immediately confiscated everything connected with it, including—so it is said—the carbon paper and ribbons used by the typists. (Vitaly Shentalinsky does not mention this theft in *The KGB's Literary Archive*, his otherwise informative book on suppressed Soviet writers.) The case went straight up to the central committee of the Communist party. Mikhail Suslov, keeper of the party's ideology, told Grossman that the novel could not be published for 200 years—a tribute, in its perverse way. Grossman appealed to General Secretary Khrushchev himself: "What is the point of me being physically free when the book I dedicated my life to is arrested?"

To no avail. At the time of his death from cancer in 1964, the despairing Grossman could only hope for *Life and Fate* to be published some day. One surviving copy of the typescript had been secreted away with a friend and was eventually smuggled abroad, allegedly with the help of Andrei Sakharov. The English-language version appeared in 1985, coincidentally with the accession of Mikhail Gorbachev and the policy of *glasnost*. The novelist Vladimir Voinovich, already in exile, was quick to welcome it as "a tremendous event," and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn expressed "great respect" for Grossman's work.

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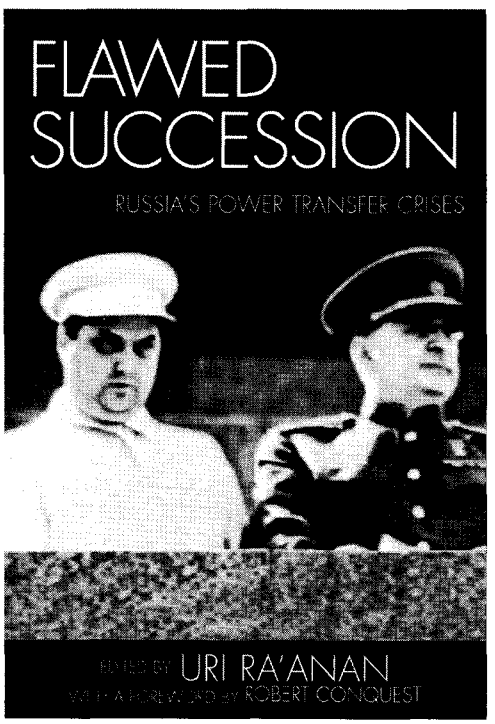

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AS FOR *A Writer at War*, it consists of the numerous surviving notebooks Grossman kept in the field, amplified into consecutive narrative by the inclusion of letters, quotations from articles in *Red Star*, and commentary by the editors. Altogether it is a compelling and dramatic whole—the raw material from which *Life and Fate* was quarried. It is also a historical document in its own right, uniquely conveying the day-to-day evolution of the war on the Eastern front.

Grossman's technique was to conduct rolling interviews with generals, snipers, tank crews, artillery gunners, pilots, anyone and everyone, and then to write up what he heard. The bloodiness, the brutality, and the self-sacrifice that went with them often stir him to emotional generalization:

> At the front, there is patience and resignation, submission to unthinkable hardships. This is the patience of a strong people. This is the patience of a great army. The greatness of the Russian soul is incredible.

Confronting concrete scenes, however, Grossman almost always remains dispassionate. "Submachine-gunner Kolosov was buried up to his chest in earth," goes one entry. "He was stuck there laughing: 'This makes me mad!'" Or again:

> I was told back at the front headquarters that Khasin's family had all been killed in Kerch by Germans carrying out a mass execution of civilians. Purely by chance, Khasin saw photographs of the dead people in a ditch and recognized his wife and children. I was thinking, what does he feel when he leads his tanks into the fighting? It is very hard to have a clear impression of this man, because there is a young woman, a doctor, in the staff *izba* [peasant house], who is ordering him about in a vulgar and impertinent manner.

Here and elsewhere, the novelist and the reporter in Grossman coexist. Twice during the war, he happened to visit Tolstoy's home at Yasnaya Polyana, and it is as though he is under a felt obligation to match its old master: "Tolstoy's grave. Roar of fighters over it, humming of explosions and the majestic calm autumn. It is so hard. I have seldom felt such pain." Cats caught in the fighting, or sheltering on windowsills from gunfire, are beneficiaries of his insistence on kindness, here verging on sentimentality. In general, the subjective and the objective correspond perfectly:

> Twilight. It is foggy and rainy. A smell of forest mold. Puddles on the road. Dark pine woods, fields, farmsteads, barns, houses with pointed roofs. A huge poster: "Soldier, here it is! The Lair of the Fascist Beast."

HAD ANYONE in authority read these diaries, Grossman would have been arrested. It would have been quite enough to quote against him the comment he records of a woman in a canteen: "Oh this Hitler! He's a real Satan! And we used to say that Communists were Satans." Perhaps protectively, he ignores the collaboration of Ukrainians in Nazi mass murder as well as the Red Army's ignominious standstill while the Germans destroyed Warsaw in 1944. But the theme that surreptitiously emerges as the days pass is his own determination to separate the heroism of the Soviet soldier from the inhumanity, vainglory, and finally the incompetence of Stalin and the party.

Patriotism and Communism, Grossman came to realize, were two distinct things, which during the war had been combined merely by accident. Much of the killing that he recorded was official brutality for the sake of it. "Extraordinary event" was the Soviet euphemism for desertion or collaboration with the enemy. Grossman reports an occasion when one such accused traitor, waiting to be executed, stood by while military engineers dug a grave for him. "'Take off your boots,' they told him. He took off one boot very deftly, with the toe of the other foot. The other boot took some time, he was jumping on one leg for a while." And elsewhere: "An extraordinary event. Sentence. Execution. They undressed and buried him. At night, he came back to his unit, in his bloodstained underwear. They shot him again."

Like the Russian mother at Stalingrad in *Life and Fate*, Grossman had feelings even for captured Germans; they too were human. But confronted with the Nazi extermination camps, and interviewing survivors and local Poles in the attempt to reconstruct exactly what had happened and so to grasp the enormity of it, he asks himself how human beings could have set up and run such places. *Red Star* published his report under the title "The Hell Called Treblinka." It was quoted at the Nuremberg trials, and is rightly reprinted at length here.

Grossman's careful and minute description of the ordeal of mass murder has a power to move and to appall akin to Primo Levi's. He was also among the very first to draw the obvious moral conclusion:

> It is infinitely hard even to read this. The reader must believe me, it is as hard to write it. Someone might ask: "Why write about all this, why remember all that?" It is the writer's duty to tell this terrible truth, and it is the civilian duty of the reader to learn it.

Stalin, and therefore the party, decreed that the victims of the Nazi extermination campaign on Soviet soil were all to be described as Soviet citizens, thus denying the particularity of the fate of the Jews. Worse than a lie, this flat denaturing of the terrible truth confirmed Grossman's burgeoning insight into the similarity between the Communist and the Nazi regimes. *Life and Fate* was a blow he struck for humanity, and now, so long after the times that consumed him, *A Writer at War* is another.

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Sleepwalking Moralists

Present-day moralists lecture the civilized but ignore the brutes.

To paraphrase the ancient Greeks, it is easy to be moral in your sleep. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other global humanitarian groups recently expressed criticism over the slated trial of the accused mass murderer Saddam Hussein. Such self-appointed auditors of moral excellence were worried that his legal representation was inadequate. Or perhaps they felt the court of the new Iraqi democracy was not quite up to the standards of wigged European judges in The Hague. Relay those concerns to the nearly one million silent souls butchered by Saddam's dictatorship. Once they waited in vain for any such international human rights organizations to stop the murdering. None could or did. Sleepwalking moralizers chastise those who listen and are civilized—but see nothing, hear nothing, and speak nothing about those in the moral abyss.

—Victor Davis Hanson

Back to the USSR

They've gotten used to freedom, so why do Russians still yearn for the old days?

Is Putin's long-run aim to restore the old Soviet Union? Russians always insist that it would be impossible to turn back the clock. Yet there is a discernible nostaligia for the terrible simplification of the old days. One recent poll found that 53 percent of Russians still regard Stalin as a great leader. The explanation is not far to seek: The collapse of communism has meant a dramatic decline in living standards. Since 1989, the Russian mortality rate has risen from below 11 per 1,000 to more than 15 per 1,000—nearly double the American rate. Whether Putin can raise living standards as quickly as they have been raised in China is a moot point. But what he can undoubtedly give Russians is a sense of geopolitical revival.

—Niall Ferguson

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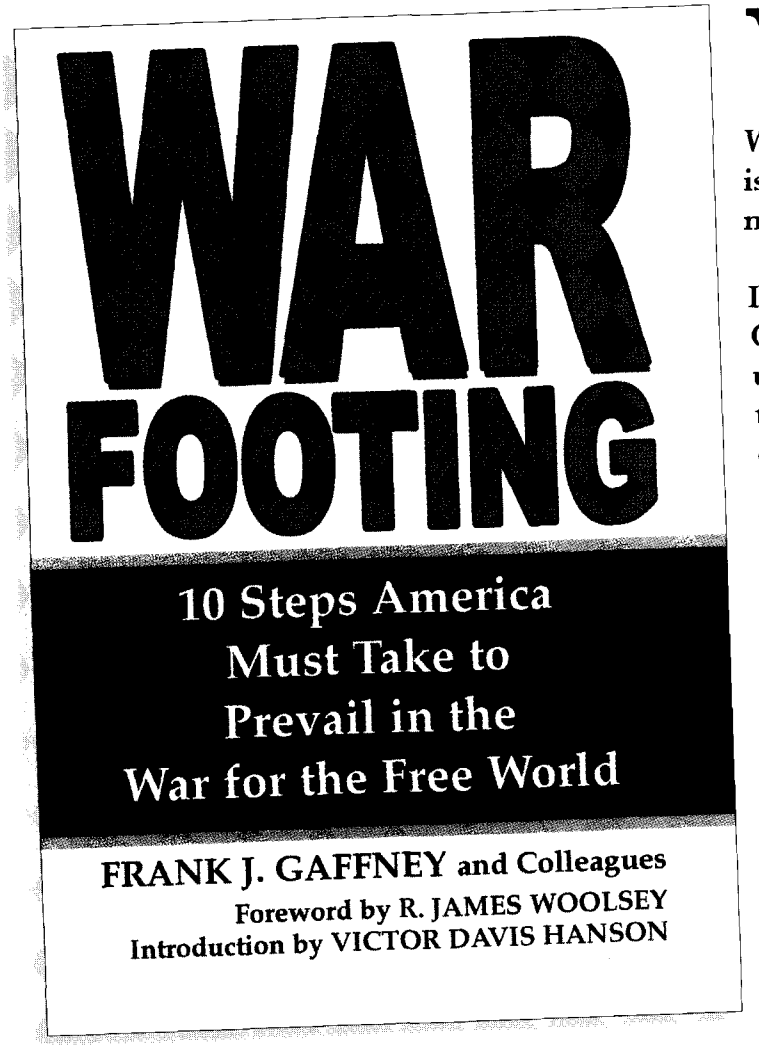
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Frank J. Gaffney is one of the most insightful and thoughtful national security experts of our time. A former senior official in the Reagan Defense Department, he founded the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Security Policy in 1988.

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